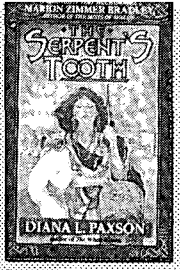
WALT CUIRLE JR
2430 AVON ROAD
ARDMORE PA 19003-2601

$2.50 U.S.
36009
0 387167 6

LICENSED TO UNC URG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



THE SERPENT'S TOOTH
by Diana L. Paxson

From the author of *The White Raven* comes a splendid fantasy of Iron Age Britain, hailed by Poul Anderson as "A mighty good, exciting read!"

STAR REQUIEM 2: *Thief of Dreams*
by Adrian Cole

The second volume in a vividly imagined fantasy series by the author of the acclaimed Omaran Saga. Roger Zelazny has called Cole a writer with a "Magic touch."

THE MAN IN THE MOON MUST DIE
by Jeff Bredenberg

In this third novel by a rising young star, a man's accidentally created duplicate creates havoc when he insists on his own right to exist.

SNOW WHITE, BLOOD RED
edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling

Classic fairy tales reworked by the best writers of today into experiences that are timeless yet contemporary. Compiled by a two-time World Fantasy Award-winning editorial team.

An Avonova Book/William Morrow

COMING IN JANUARY 1993

AVONOVA

AVON BOOKS
The Hearst Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

news from Questar SCIENCE FICTION | FANTASY

THE SUMMER QUEEN
by Joan D. Vinge
Cover art by Michael Whelan
0-446-36251-4 $5.99 (In Canada: $6.99)

FINALLY IN PAPERBACK— THE SPECTACULAR SEQUEL TO *THE SNOW QUEEN!*

Joan D. Vinge returns to the realm of her Hugo Award-winning *The Snow Queen* to deliver an epic work of rare visionary brilliance.

Moon Dawntreader is the Summer Queen, Lady of Tiamet, pledged to forever end offworld exploitation and save the mers, whose blood gives immortality. But hostile Summer tribes and treacherous Winters plot to subvert...in a breath-taking, monumental space saga that spans worlds, time, and even eternity itself.

"As large and splendid as its predecessor."
— CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

"Monumental...a galaxy-spanning family-saga epic."
— WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

"A sequel even more successful than the works that preceded it. Given that *The Snow Queen* won the 1981 Hugo for best novel, this is high praise indeed."
— PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

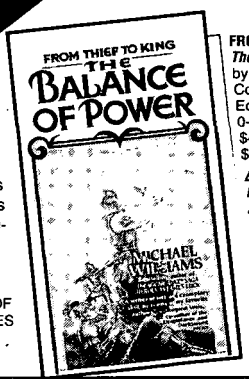
ALSO READ: ***The Snow Queen***
0-445-20529-6/ $5.50 (In Canada: $6.99)

ALSO THIS MONTH:

Here's the exciting final entry in bestselling author Michael Williams' fascinating *From Thief to King* trilogy!

Under the harsh thrall of usurper King Dragmond and his demonic lover, Ravenna, Palerna has become a land of darkness, disease, and dread. But a wizard's apprentice named Brenn—who is also the true king's heir—remains determined to topple Ravenna's nefarious reign and free Palerna of its veil of horrors!

"A writer of exemplary skill, he is one of my favorite authors." — MARGARET WEISS, COAUTHOR OF THE *DRAGONLANCE®* AND *DARKSWORD* SERIES



FROM THIEF TO KING:
The Balance of Power
by Michael Williams
Cover art by
Edwin Herder
0-446-36244-1
$4.99 (In Canada: $5.99)

ALSO READ:
From Thief to King: A Forest Lord
0-446-36146-1
$4.50 (In Canada: $5.99)
A Sorcerer's Apprentice
0-445-21054-0
$4.50
(In Canada: $5.95)

AVAILABLE AT BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE WARNER BOOKS

A Time Warner Company Questar is a registered trademark of Warner Books, Inc. ©1992 Warner Books, Inc.

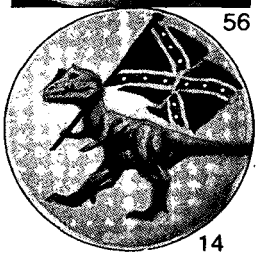
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

104

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 17 No. 1 (Whole Number 196)
January 1993
Next Issue on Sale
January 5, 1993

56



14

Novelettes

32 Sun So Hot I Froze to Death — Tony Daniel
68 Three Queens — Esther M. Friesner
104 The Extra — Greg Egan
134 Beneath the Stars of Winter — Geoffrey A. Landis

Short Stories

14 Mudzilla's Last Stand — Allen Steele
56 On the Brink of that Bright New World — Robert Reed
90 With Twoclicks Watching — Rick Wilber
120 Ocean Hammer — Rebecca Ore

Departments

4 Letters
163 On Books — Baird Searles
169 Index
173 Seventh Annual Readers' Award Ballot
176 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by Bruce Boston, Robert Frazier, Sandra J. Lindow, Rachel Pollack, and William John Watkins

Cover for "Mudzilla's Last Stand" by Gary Freeman

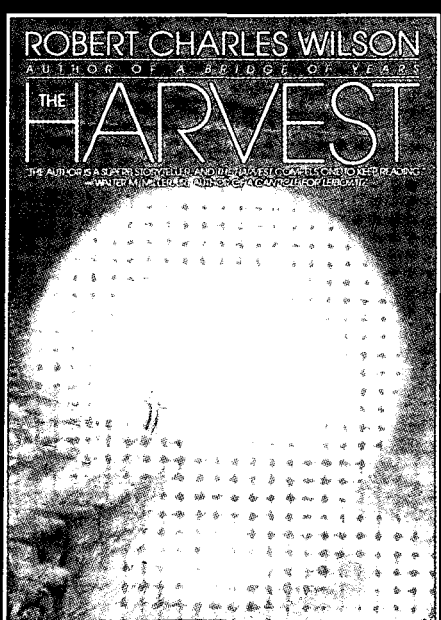
Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

Published every 28 days which includes special issues in April and November by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 per copy ($3.25 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $40.50, (GST included in Canada) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. For back issues send $3.50 to Asimov's Science Fiction, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, © 1992 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"THE AUTHOR IS A SUPERB STORYTELLER, AND THE HARVEST COMPELS ONE TO KEEP READING."

–Walter M. Miller, author of A Canticle for Leibowitz



"Suppose you were offered a solution to some of humanity's most enduring problems, including the problem of mortality. Would you accept? Would you choose to live in effect forever, even if it meant surrendering some part of your humanity? Matt Wheeler struggles to answer the question even as he loses much of what he loves to a relentless alien benevolence. The question troubled me almost as much, but I had an easier time answering it. I was allowed to write this large book of ultimate things, *The Harvest*."

Robert C. Wilson

SPECTRA BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I was horrified, simply horrified that some woman demands that all literature be fit for her nine year old daughter. Does this mean that next year we can progress to that which is fit for ten-year-old girls, and in twelve years we will be permitted adult material?

She also scolds you for supporting religious freedom! Has she never read the Constitution of the United States? In England in the 1800s Rothschild was several times denied his seat in the House of Commons because he refused to take the oath "as a good Christian Gentleman," and here in Quebec late in the century a man named Hart was refused a seat in the Assembly because he was Jewish. But from 1791 on, Article VI, Section three of the Bill of Rights prevented this discrimination from occurring in the U.S.A. (". . . but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States").

But getting back to stories which horrified her, and which her daughter can't read; what would she say of a book which among its contents had a story about:

A head of state who has many wives and mistresses. Not content with this he also desires the only wife of one of his military officers. He has sex with this woman and impregnates her. But this is not enough! In order to possess this woman completely he commits murder by proxy. He has the minister of war order the soldier to the bloodiest front where he is killed.

If such a story appeared in your magazine she would be horrified, simply horrified. But I'll bet that not only does she have that Book in her house; but that she makes sure her daughter studies it (II Samuel, 11, 1-27).

Sincerely,

Ronald Herman
Montreal, QUE
Canada

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I must take exception to the letter from Alan Lipton in the latest issue of *Asimov's*. I *like* Janet Kagan's stories about Mirabile. Mirabile is a pioneer world, and the people there reflect that. My grandmother was a pioneer, and she's told me many stories about what life was like back then. Take away the fantastic elements, and Mirabile is eastern Tennessee a couple of hundred years ago.

As for the people being loving and happy people, when people are busy and leading fruitful lives, they do tend to be happy. And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they're too busy to fight and backstab during the day, and too tired to do it at night. I find it delightful that the characters on Mirabile are interesting, warm, loving, intelligent, and have a good sense of humor. The gem of the stories is to discover how they solve the latest genetic mishap, not to determine who stabbed whom or what atrocity happened next. I don't think they're "smarmy" or "drenched in molasses" at all. They're a joy to read.

There's enough violence, hatred, and sex in other stories. Please keep these gentler tales for those of us who like them.

Wanda Wolfe
Oak Ridge, TN

Dear Sir/Mme;

This is a letter of complaint.

I doubt that I will be able to return to my work this evening having just read Mary Rosenblum's "Synthesis." The story will deprive me of an evening's work, badly needed in these difficult times. I am a trial lawyer so maybe I should sue *Asimov's*.

It would be easy to fill diskettes with lists of exceptional science fiction in no end of priorities and categories.

"Synthesis," in my opinion, leaves most of even the best behind. I want to read it again. I am driven to reflect on the ivory lattice-spheres within spheres of the story.

The genius of Freud is popularly misunderstood. His gift to the world was the externalization of the multiple levels of the human essence, that genii like Shakespeare capsulated in drama. Ro-

GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Managing Editor
IAN RANDAL STROCK:
Associate Editor
SCOTT L. TOWNER:
Assistant Editor
JEAN TRAINA:
Design Director
TERRI CZECZKO:
Art Director
ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer
MARILYN ROBERTS:
Senior Production Manager
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights
CONSTANCE SCARBOROUGH:
Contracts Manager
BARBARA PARROTT:
Director of Newsstand Circulation
BRUCE SCHWARTZ:
Director of Circulation Subscription Sales
DENNIS JONES:
Operations Manager Subscription Sales
DAVID MENDELSON:
Renewal & Billing Manager Subscription Sales
FRED SABLOFF:
Advertising Sales Director
JUDY DORMAN:
Advertising and Classified Advertising Coordinator

ISAAC ASIMOV
Editorial Director
(1977–1992)

CHRISTOPH HAAS-HEYE
President & Publisher
Dell Magazines

JACK HOEFT
President & CEO
Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212) 856-6306

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
Dresner Direct, Inc., N.Y., N.Y. (212)889-1078

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's* Dell Magazines, 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

senblum, with humble verbal grace takes the search for comprehension of the personality's identity, or essence, a leap farther.

I have always been repelled by stories within stories and images within images because they force my mathematical and analytic processes to shove aside my mind's attempt to relax in a story and enjoy its challenge without the kind of dissection I must do all day for the high stakes of other people's lives. Rosenblum teased me into the network of her onion layered story so gently that I was absorbed before I could resist.

You have printed a masterpiece of both literature and psychology, of which the magazine as well as Mary Rosenblum should be justly proud, *but you have ruined my work schedule for the night in doing so.* I am going home to read, reflect, and maybe write. My staff will not understand this tomorrow! Yours gratefully,

Ed J. Brogden
Sarnia, ONT
Canada

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Please pardon me if this letter of comment is less refined than some of the letters you get. The fanzines and comic books to which I'm used to writing are generally less formal than I'd expect of a scrupulously well-written publication such as yours.

I'm writing in regards to your March issue. I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the stories in this month's collection. In fact, I was gripped by all of them, though I was less than fully impressed by some of the short stories. However, let me dispense compliments first.

I found little to disagree with in your editorial, of course. (How could it be otherwise?) As an English-speaker of long standing I find few things as sweet as my own native tongue well-spoken. However, regional accents also have their charm. The height of refinement must surely be BBC English, that is, the accent which British Broadcasting Corp. actors usually affect. Yet a Yorkshire drawl, with its archaic "thees" and "thous," is closer to Shakespeare's English than the clipped accents of the Stratford stage! It's surely a toss-up as to whether the Cockney's twang or the Scot's lilt is the tougher, although they have a Bronx cabby's snarl and the quiet menace of Strine, as Australians call their speech, to compete with! Likewise, what sound could be as sweet and lilting as English as a Jamaican or Bahamian speaks it? Surely those who love language must have a soft spot in their hearts for the regional variations in its pronunciation.

As for expletives, I agree with you mostly. There must, however, be times when nothing else will do to express pain or frustration. Still, using them to replace thought or to summon one's reader's attention is laziness and nothing more. I'm glad to note that you have never stooped so low.

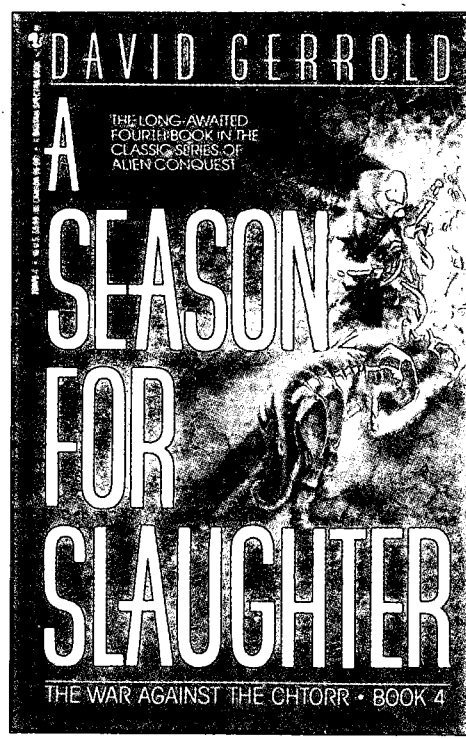
As to the stories in this issue, in no particular order, I enjoyed Frederik Pohl's "The Martians," Charles Sheffield's "Deep Safari," and Mary Rosenblum's "Synthesis" the most. Mr. Pohl's story was easily as good as the best he's done before. I look forward to his *Mining*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE LONG-AWAITED NEW ADVENTURE IN THE WAR AGAINST THE CHTORR.

"At first, I thought I was writing a harmless little story about giant alien insects; but as I started getting deeper and deeper into the work– Who are these guys? Why are they here?– I discovered there's a whole other inquiry to be conducted. What does it mean to be a human being? This is the real war."

David


DAVID GERROLD
THE LONG-AWAITED FOURTH BOOK IN THE CLASSIC SERIES OF ALIEN CONQUEST
A SEASON FOR SLAUGHTER
THE WAR AGAINST THE CHTORR • BOOK 4

560 pages • $5.99($6.99 in Canada)

SPECTRA BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Oort, of which it is a part. "Deep Safari" was in the best tradition of *Fantastic Voyage*. I was impressed with the twist he put on it. "Synthesis" was my favorite story in this issue, however. It could easily have been expanded into a dull novel and I hope it will not be. At its present length it painted a picture of a future not unlike Bill Gibson's cyberpunk world, but so much more optimistic and humane! Ms. Rosenblum's use of virtual reality as a metaphor for the human condition was brilliant! I hope to find more of her stories in the future.

While I enjoyed all the stories in this issue, as I said, I must confess that some of the stories didn't quite seem right to me. Again in no particular order, Maureen McHugh's "The Beast," S. A. Stolnack's "Straw For The Fire," and Diane Mapes's "Love Walked In" all seemed to me to be more fantasy than science fiction. While I do enjoy the former, it was for the latter that I subscribed to your magazine. Furthermore, speaking personally as a subscriber, I would prefer that fantastic stories be the exception in your science fiction magazine, rather than the rule. However, as I have only recently begun my subscription, perhaps I am judging too harshly with too little evidence. Also, let me repeat that I did enjoy these stories, out of place as they seemed to me.

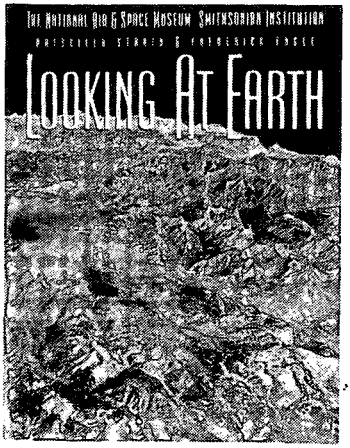
As to Mike Resnick's "Song of a Dry River," I'm afraid I must find fault. While it was undoubtedly a fascinating study of character and of power, it was, in my opinion, fatally flawed by its limited scientific or technical content. They made a mere guest appearance in one scene. If one simply assumed that N'Gai is real and that he does listen to mundumugus, it could as easily have been set in pre-colonial Kenya. At one time a story like this would have been called a Bat Durston, a "mainstream" tale set in space which could have had a terrestrial setting. "Song of a Dry River" was a good story, but it didn't need to be an SF story to work. I do know that it is a part of a series and I admit that I am not familiar with that series. However, judging only from this story, I am led to wonder if any of them need to be set in a space colony.

Finally, let me comment briefly on your up-coming fifteenth anniversary double issue. In my room, on my book shelf, I have a copy of *Asimov's* with a simple, red cover, adorned, not with an illustration of any of the stories within, but with a photograph of nobody less than the good Doctor Asimov himself resplendent in a plain blue tie. It is dated Spring 1977 and it boasts 192 pages. Beside it is an issue with a plain yellow cover and beside that one whose cover is plain blue, both of which bear an image of the man after whom they were named, this time with a handsome string tie. Although I have not seen every issue of your magazine, a young man's developing career being what it is and finances affected by the wildly shifting tides of economy, I have valued Davis Publications' and your success since that time.

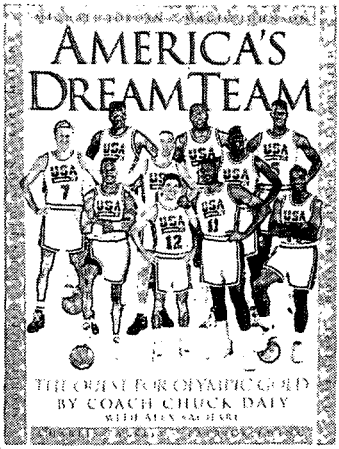
Please accept my congratulations on your fifteenth year in print. May you enjoy many more!

Allan D. Burrows

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LOOKING AT EARTH is an unprecedented portrait of our planet as seen from the heavens. See the earth in images captured by spacecraft that reveal sights hidden from earth-bound eyes. Spectacular wonders such as The Grand Canyon, Mount Fugi, the Andes, and Africa's Great Rift emerge in sweeping panoramas in this beautiful, hardbound book. *Looking At Earth's* 304 pages are packed with 290 exciting, full-color photographs, satellite images, photo mosaics and high-resolution topographical images.



AMERICA'S DREAM TEAM: The Quest For Olympic Gold is the only book of its kind to chronicle the USA Olympic Basketball Team. Written by coach Chuck Daly, published in conjunction with the NBA, this book includes the team's history, statistics, strategy, player biographies, behind the scenes information-the whole story from training camp to Barcelona. Follow the Dream Team on their road to Olympic glory with 275 full-color photos and illustrations in this beautiful hardboud edition.

Please send me: ____ copies of **LOOKING AT EARTH @ $39.95** each
____ copies of **AMERICA'S DREAM TEAM @ $24.95** each

Please add $1.50 per book for shipping & handling. NYS residents add 8.25% sales tax.
Please make check or money order payable to **Turner Publishing, Inc.**
Send to: **Turner Publishing, Inc., 420 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10018**

Name _____

Address _____ Phone _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dear Dr. Asimov:

For years now, I have read your articles, editorials, magazines, and books. I have often had the desire to communicate my enjoyment and thanks. Each time I have considered the heft of your mailbag and decided that you surely know that folks who buy and read are telling you something positive, though not terribly personally, each time they make a purchase or renew their subscriptions. However, your editorial in the March 1992 issue has finally tipped me off into the "I have to write" mode.

In 1987 my family moved here to "merrie" old England where, as a former English teacher, I expected to revel in "The Queen's English." Your editorial comment, "American schools make no attempt to teach proper English, or if they do, they fail miserably," particularly in the context of your other statement, "Every once in a while I hear someone who is British and educated speak and I come over all embarrassed. . . ." simply demanded my response.

I suppose it somewhat depends on just what you mean by "educated," but the English spoken and written here is, generally speaking, the worst I have ever heard. The most "educated" don't seem to realize that subjects and verbs are supposed to agree in number. Pronunciation is so bad that spelling is similarly atrocious. For example, all dialects (and there are an incredible number even within relatively small geographical areas) tend to pronounce "er" as "a." Hence "mister" becomes "mista," "faster," "fasta," etc. There is a stylish lisp which prevails in enormous numbers of people. It is not apparently a speech defect as much as a slavish imitation of a speech pattern once thought to be "in." According to this the diphthong "th" is pronounced as an "f." I thereby have become the father of "free" daughters . . . who "fink" for themselves.

This year for the first time (yes, dear Dr., I said the *first* time) the British government has required the teaching of English in "state" schools (what we in the U.S. call "public" schools). Up until now the *only* required course in primary and secondary schools has been Religious Education.

British teachers, at least by American standards, are poorly trained; work under abysmal conditions; have the enormous imposition of politically mandated tests, papers, and reports forced into classroom hours; and are extremely low paid.

Textbooks are poorly conceived, horribly proofed, and full of black/white generalizations which most of us thought went out with World War II. The public has virtually no say in either the funding or direction of "their" schools. Those in control seem to live in Westminster having arrived there as a result of their superior (?), certainly expensive "private" school education. Their knowledge of what is going on in the rest of the world is significantly tempered by the fact that they already know that whatever it is has to be much worse than anything that has its origin in England. Educational ideas (or any other variety for that matter) from anywhere across the English borders, whether Scotland or Na-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mibia, Wales or Mongolia, Northern Ireland or the U.S.A. are considered too foreign to be really workable here.

The "educated" Britisher who truly speaks the Queen's English is as foreign to these shores (perhaps more so) than to the U.S. "New York" may well be the language spoken in your City, but as a dialect it is certainly no farther from the Queen's English than "Sussex Schoolboy."

Profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity are much rarer occurrences here than I was accustomed to before I moved from Connecticut, Los Angeles, and other points American. Even "bloody" is considered a coarse enough expression that it rarely appears in mixed company.

Mr. Schreiner's letter in the same issue bemoans the fact that English is America's native tongue, poorly taught, poorly spoken and not valued properly. In fact, I have found that English is better taught and spoken in the U.S. and is a lot closer to the Queen's English (albeit Elizabeth I not Elizabeth II) than that spoken today in Britain by "educated" folks.

Sorry for the diatribe, but it reflects the disappointment of my own naïve expectations when I came over here.

Thanks for all the challenges and pleasures you have given and continue to give me.

Ronald S. Gister
Worthing, West Sussex
England

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I hate to bandy clichés about, and I know you have been referred to this way before, but—You sly old fox, you! I just finished reading *Nemesis*, and thoroughly enjoyed the way you disclaimed any connection the book might have to either the "Foundation," or "robot" series in the Author's Note, and then slipped in an epilogue that made both connections not only plausible, but inevitable. It demonstrates a pet theory of mine that a sense of humor will get one farther in life than genius. How marvelous it must be to possess both.

But, on to politics. It has recently occurred to me why I find many of SF's recent trends less than intriguing. It seems that so many of the classics in the field—including your own "Foundation" novels, the future histories of Robert Heinlein, and the *Dune* books of Frank Herbert—deal not only with the sociology of the future in response to technological advance, but with politics on a grand scale. As the current presidential race clearly demonstrates, people have grown more and more disenchanted with, and disengaged from, politics in any form. SF writers, being children of their generation, seem to have picked up this trend.

The cyberpunk writers in general seem to have allowed politics to devolve into a dingy, *film-noir* pop-sociology based on inevitable social decay and techno-addiction. Many of the current crop of neo-Golden Age mavens seem to be so enamored of either Stephen King or J. R. R. Tolkien that it does not occur to them to speculate on what terrestrial (or extra-terrestrial) power structures will look like in the wake of current events.

The past fifty years has acceler-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ated science and technology beyond what would have previously been conceivable, and made true global politics possible for the first time in history. Who in 1901 could have imagined the incredible swings in human and political relations since that time? In 1972, could Richard Nixon, in his wildest, red-baiting fantasies ever have imagined the demise of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, with nary a shot fired or a bomb dropped?

Like our current president, it seems we are content to stand back in statesmanlike ennui and ignore the march of momentous events unless they are accompanied with gunfire. And it seems that our current futurists are likewise content to write about the human consequences of virtual reality, sex after genetic engineering, and endless encounters with more and more vicious BEMs. Where is the speculation? Will America exist in 2100? Will there be world government in the next millennium, and is that necessarily something to be desired? Will the Bible and Nostradamus be proven out, and the Middle East become our final battleground? The closest thing I've read lately to this kind of intelligent speculation is what would have happened had Hitler won the war.

Are we so frightened of the immediate future that we cannot bear to read and write about how the threads of current events may be woven into future history? Are we so impressed with the bells and whistles of technology—or so jaded by them—that we cannot look beyond to the future condition of the human race? Perhaps I am simply reading the wrong books; if so, I welcome correction. But it seems that as SF becomes more popular and more accepted as a literary form, it is also becoming more generic and less daring. I believe it was Heinlein himself who urged us not to ignore politics, that it is "only slightly less important than your own heartbeat." This is why I enjoyed *Nemesis* so much.

Hari Seldon, where are you when we need you?

Sincerely,

Jeff Clothier
Marshalltown, IA

Dear *Asimov's*,

It has been years since I've read a poem that I have enjoyed as much as "Half Sisters" by Ace G. Pilkington in the March 1992 issue. Thanks for including poetry in your publication—it makes me think I should spend some time giving poetry a closer look.

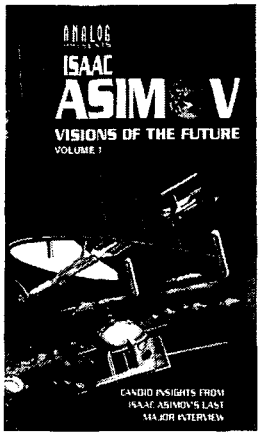
Sincerely,

Terry Wentz
Hill City, SD

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *Asimov's* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ANALOG PRESENTS
ISAAC ASIMOV'S VISIONS OF THE FUTURE



LOOK INTO THE FUTURE WITH ONE OF THE GREATEST SCIENCE/ SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The Premier Edition of an important video series, totally original and totally new.

Isaac Asimov's Visions Of The Future- as dynamic and inspiring as science fiction- is presented in this ambitious new video series. Isaac Asimov guided the series development, and in his last major interview, he spoke eloquently about a world being shaped by the work done in today's laboratories and research centers.

- **Robots and Robotics**
- **Genetic Engineering**
- **Nanotechnology**
- **Deep Space Travel**
- **Terraforming Planets**
- **Artificial Intelligence**

Be sure to add this very special video to your collection, and look for the next volume of Analog Presents Isaac Asimov's Visions Of The Future to be released soon.

Order This Collector's Edition Today! Only $19.95 plus $4.95 shipping and handling.

YES! I WANT TO RECEIVE THE PREMIER EDITION OF ISAAC ASIMOV'S VISIONS OF THE FUTURE VIDEO.

Enclosed is my check or money order for $19.95 plus $4.95 shipping and handling.

☐ MasterCard ☐ Visa
☐ Check or Money Order
Card #_____
Exp. Date_____
Signature_____
OR CALL: 1-800-486-5347
Ask for Asimov's Vision

Send your order to:
Isaac Asimov's Visions Of The Future
Quality Video Inc.
Pentagon Towers
P.O. Box 36190
Minneapolis, MN 55435-6190

Please send my video to:
Name:_____
Address:_____Apt.:_____
City:_____State:_____Zip:_____

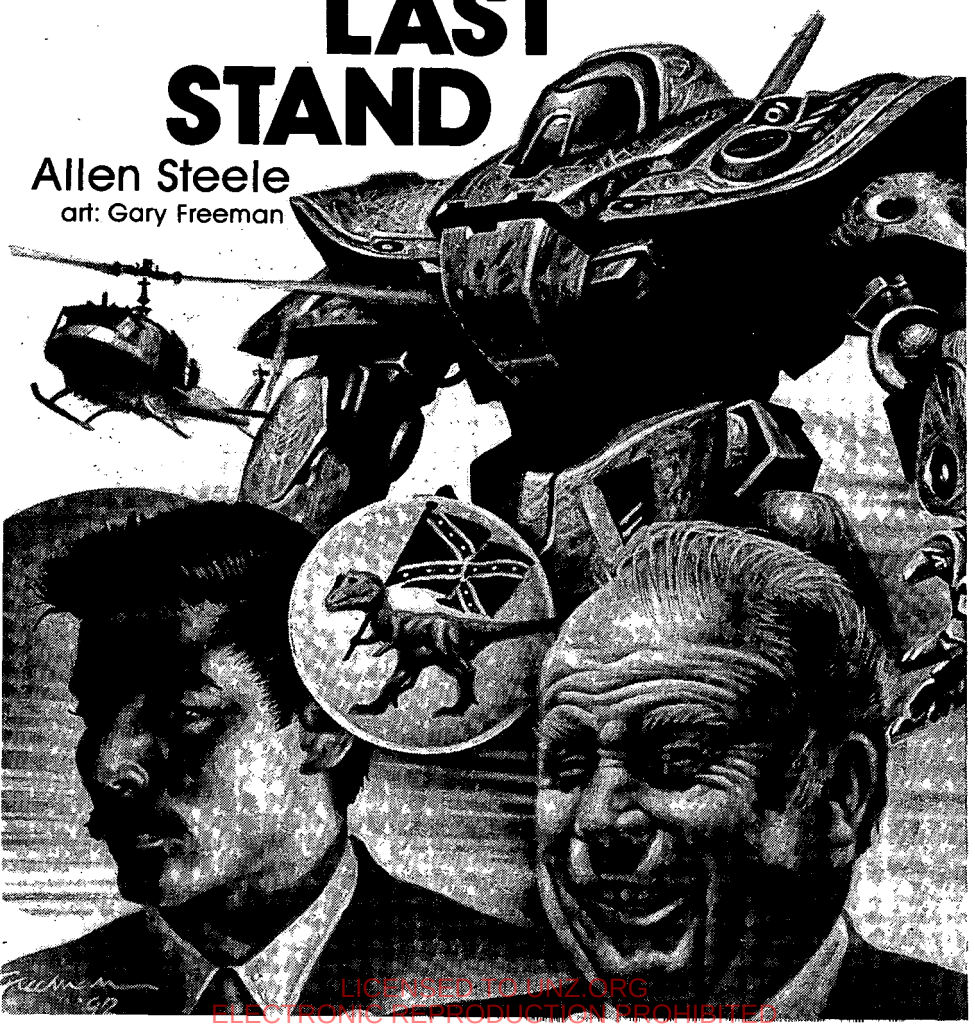
Video available in VHS only. Minnesota residents add 6.5% sales tax. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This month's spirited cover story was inspired by the author's love of Japanese animation—especially the giant-robot cartoons. Mr. Steele recently moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and that city serves as the perfect backdrop to . . .

MUDZILLA'S LAST STAND

Allen Steele
art: Gary Freeman



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"*Raaaaaa-ooooogawwhhh* c'mon down to the Midstate Coliseum this Saturday night for raaaaww power! *power! POWER!* as Big Muddy Productions and Fratz Beer presents *aawwwrrrrgh!* Motorama '99! Fast cars! Funny cars! Bigfoot trucks! Watch 'em skid! Watch 'em crash! *Baaaaroooooghh!* And featuring for the first time in this area *reeearrrrgghh!* MUDZILLA-*zilla-zilla! Haaawwwwnnnnkkkk!* Tickets nineteen-ninety-five for adults, twelve-fifty for children available at all Big Bee Mart, Discville, and Computix locations! Motorama '99 featuring *Mudzilla*, this Saturday night at the Midstate Coliseum! *Ahhhrrrreeeee-bahhh!* BE THERE!"

Edwin "Eddie Joe" Carlisle; owner, Big Muddy Productions

Mudzilla? The best idea I ever had, and maybe the worst. Drove me bankrupt by the time it went to the Tennessee Speedway, and my lawyers would probably kill me if they knew I was even discussing this with you. Want to guess how many lawsuits I'm still fighting? (*Points to a file cabinet in the corner*) Enough to fill that cabinet, yes sir.

Well, y'know, what the hell. (*Sighs*) You've come a long way, son, so you might as well get the story from me and not from one of my competitors. Pull up a rock and lemmee give you the lowdown on what happened with Mudzilla. . . .

Big Muddy Productions, y'see, specializes in arena entertainment. Big-name concerts, demolition derbies, sporting events . . . you name it, we done it. We started out here in St. Louis about twenty years ago as a small company, booking night-club acts and so forth, until we eventually expanded and began working with various sponsors to bring shows to places like Busch Stadium and the St. Louis Arena. Later on, we started booking stuff with the major venues in the Southeast and Midwest. For awhile there, we were doing pretty good business, 'specially with rock shows and tractor pulls, things like that.

A couple of years ago, though, the bottom just about fell out of the whole industry. For one thing, the major rock groups all but stopped touring, because the overhead costs became too prohibitive and people couldn't afford to spend thirty dollars for cheap-seat tickets . . . and, y'know, who wants to go see a bunch of guys who are just lip-synching a tape anyway, right? All the sports teams had become franchised, so independents like me couldn't afford to bring 'em into town. As for the auto events . . . well, they were still dependable revenue during the summer and fall, but after the big tractor-pull craze of the '80s, the whole blamed thing had started to die off, once the movie stars stopped slumming with the hillbillies and the old-timers decided to stay home with their families and watch it on TV instead.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

'Round about '97, this company was beginning to feel the pinch. Insurance premiums, union pay-scales, the costs of renting all the equipment, everything from contract riders to paying for ushers and custodial services, not to mention city and state taxes . . . it was just wearing us to the bone. Meanwhile, our gate revenues were taking a steady slide, 'cause we couldn't offer people anything new. (*Shrugs*) Y'know, to be quite honest, if you've seen a guy jump a motorcycle over ten school buses *once*, you've seen it a *hundred* times, right?

Like I said, times were tough and this company was beginning to hurt, and I don't mean maybe. Now, I knew that we had to find something *fresh* that would bring people back into the stadiums, but I didn't have a handle on what would work. Hell, if I could have hired Madonna to take on the entire Dallas Cowboys starting line-up on field under the lights, I would have *done* it, as long as it would make a buck.

At any rate, I was sitting here one day, working the phones and trying to find a fair-to-middlin' country band who wouldn't mind playing intermission during Monster Truck Rally '97, when my secretary steps in and tells me there's some Jap . . . 'scuse me, a worthy oriental gentleman . . . waiting to see me in the lobby.

"Tell him to get an appointment," I says, and Bobbie says he doesn't want one, he wants to see me *now*. "Ask him what he wants to see me about," I says and she says, "He wants to sell you a robot." Well, that kinda pisses me off, so I say, "Tell him to take a hike, 'cause I *got* one at home, a CybeServe Butler 3000, and it isn't worth a tinker's damn, can't even bring me a cold drink from the refrigerator or nothing."

So she ducks her head out the door and tells him, and she listens for a second, then she comes back to me and says, "He wants to know if *your* robot is forty-eight feet tall and can demolish an infantry platoon?"

And I say, "*What?*"

"This is the new face of modern warfare . . ."

(CLOSE-UP SHOT of a cylindrical weapons pod as it opens fire. Anti-tank mortar fires at thirty rounds per minute, smoke blossoming from its narrow shafts, as rockets flash into the pale sky. CAMERA PANS LEFT as the missiles streak across the hot desert toward mobile artillery parked near the horizon; there are distant fireballs, followed seconds later by faint booms, as the artillery units are destroyed.)

"The unmanned mobile artillery units which were targeted during this test simulation in the Gobi Desert have been completely destroyed, from a distance of two and a half miles. Were this an actual combat situation, this would be considered a tactical victory. However, you're not watching the work of a mere tank. . . ."

(CAMERA SLOWLY BACKS AWAY from the weapons pod, until it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gradually becomes apparent that it is not mounted on top of a tracked vehicle. First, an armor-plated shoulder becomes visible, then a glass-canopied head, then the boxlike thorax, then the enormous arms, then the wide legs, until finally the entire robot can be seen. As we watch, the enormous machine lifts a foot and takes a step forward.)

"This is a semi-autonomous robot, the last word in ground-support combat armor. It is Yuji Corporation's XCA-115A, sometimes known as the Kyojin-1. . . ."

Tazaki Norio: senior sales representative, United States division, Yuji Corporation

Yes, Mr. Steele, you may switch on your recorder . . . um, no, we won't need to use the autotranslator. I speak American English quite well, thank you.

Let's start at the beginning, shall we? The Yuji Corporation had been working on the development of the XCA–115's since the late '80s, and we produced the first two prototypes in 1996. To understand why we would want to build these machines, you must realize that my country has had a long-standing fascination with robots. In Japan, we've had animated cartoon adventures about giant robots for many years now, and so it was only logical that the generation of engineers and scientists who had grown up watching shows like "Macross" and "Patlabor" might actually want to build these things, just as your country's space scientists were influenced by watching "Star Trek."

Among other things, the Yuji Corporation has been a world-leader in industrial robotics since the 1970s, and many of our products have seen extensive military application. The company foresaw some possible value in developing man-piloted combat robots, so it devoted considerable time and expense in designing and building two prototypes of the XCA–115 Kyojin. The intent was to produce a large, bipedal vehicle which could be used for two major purposes . . . first, as an all-terrain mobile weapons platform, specifically for tactical ground warfare, and second, as an urban police vehicle, specifically for use in riot situations. We believed that, if such a machine could be built and successfully demonstrated, the company would have a product which could be marketed overseas as the leading edge of twenty-first-century munitions technology.

As I said, Yuji Corporation spent considerable time, money, and resources on the Kyojin's R&D, so it didn't . . . ah, how do you say? . . . go down well with the company's directors when the two prototypes were field-tested and it was discovered that they didn't perform very well in real-life situations.

First one of the XCA–115's . . . specifically, the Kyojin–1 . . . was tested in a mock-combat scenario, simulating a ground war in the Middle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

East. As you saw in the promotional film, it operated superbly as an aggressor. However, in a defensive mode, it . . . ah, how shall we say? . . . it stuck out like a sore thumb. Anything that tall tends to stand out on the battlefield, making itself an inviting target for enemy aircraft and artillery. Even with on-board electronic counter-measures, any pilot or gunner who had good eyesight could easily aim their weapons at the robot and . . . ur, blow it away. Also, because the robot's diesel motors consumed an enormous amount of fuel and it required almost constant maintenance, a small convoy was necessary to supply and service even one robot, and such a convoy is especially vulnerable in a real combat situation.

So then we took the second XCA–115, the Kyojin-2, and refitted it with tear-gas launchers instead of ballistic weapons. We tested it in Osaka, where there had been a great deal of street-gang violence in one of the city's worst slums. We put it in the service of the Osaka police force on a trial basis, and at first they were very proud to have it. Showed it off to the press and so forth. Then it was sent into a riot situation, and . . . (*coughs*) pardon me . . . um, it didn't do very well *there* either. . . .

How? Well . . . (*coughs again*) excuse me . . . the Kyojin-2 was a bit too cumbersome for an urban environment. It tended to fall over things like vending machines, trash cans, cars. Had problems walking around buildings. Stepped on things . . . no, no people, but it did crush quite a few parked motorbikes.

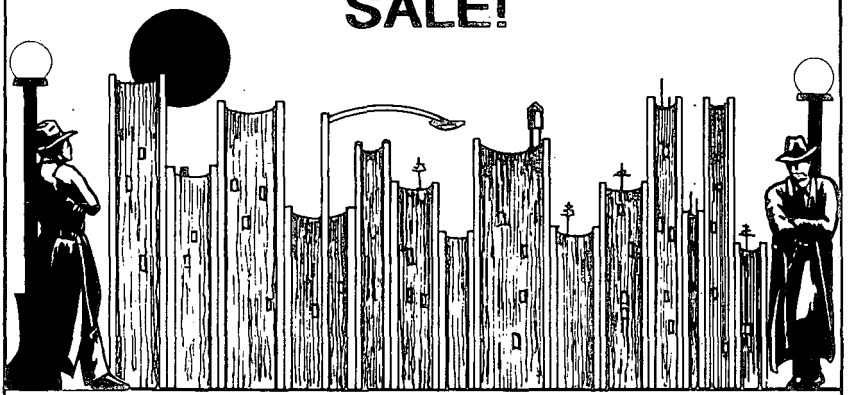
And instead of being intimidated by its great size, the gangs . . . well, to be quite honest, they *laughed* at it. The tear-gas didn't faze them, since they had already learned how to wear goggles and masks when the police fired gas cartridges at them, and then they took to the rooftops and threw objects at the pilot's cockpit, or even jumped out of windows onto the robot's shoulders, where they would tear off the antennas and break the cameras. The unfortunate pilot suffered a cut on his forehead when his canopy was shattered by a brick, and he swore he'd never drive one of these things again.

(Sighs.) It was most embarrassing. After the test, the Osaka police declined our further assistance . . . in fact, they asked us to remove the Kyojin from the city. And, of course, we had to pay for all the vehicles it stepped on. Many people in the company suffered *haji* . . . lost face, you might say. Several executives had to quit their jobs, many more were demoted. Mr. Yuji himself had to apologize to the Osaka city government.

When it was all over, the company decided to abandon the project entirely and leave this sort of thing to *manga* books and TV . . . but the board of directors decided that we had to recoup our loses, and the only

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S ANTHOLOGY WAREHOUSE SALE!



Join us in our first anthology warehouse sale with great savings! For only $12.95 (includes postage and handling), you will receive five classic Alfred Hitchcock anthologies. Our warehouse is packed with anthologies that will provide you with hours of great reading. Act quickly...this sale is for a limited time.

Please send your name and address with your check or money order for $12.95 to:

Alfred Hitchcock
P.O. Box 40
Vernon, NJ 07462 MPJH-3

While we cannot accommodate requests for specific anthologies, we guarantee that you will be delighted with your surprise assortment.

Available only in the US and Canada. Canadian orders please add $4.00 (US funds only). Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way to do that was to sell the two XCA–115 prototypes to whoever would purchase them.

As a result, I was asked to find an American buyer, at least for the Kyojin-1, which had suffered the lesser amount of damage. (*Shrugs*) This was not very easy, because the Pentagon had no interest in the XCA–115, nor did any of your country's police departments . . . everyone had seen the news media's film of the Osaka riot. For a time, I thought they could be sold to Hollywood, but everyone at the studios with whom I spoke said that giant robot movies were . . . um, I believe the word is *passé*. Besides, they told me, Industrial Light & Magic could do the same thing using miniature models.

No one in America seemed to be interested. I had almost given up hope when I turned on my TV late one night and saw . . . (*smiles*) yes, I saw my first tractor-pull. I watched this and I thought, "Wouldn't it be interesting if . . . ?"

(VIDEOTAPE CLIP of a river barge docked at an industrial pier on the Mississippi River; a bridge crane is unloading an enormous cargo container onto a flatbed truck, while several dozen people watch from nearby.)

"A small crowd gathered this afternoon to watch the anticipated arrival of St. Louis's newest attraction . . . a giant Japanese combat robot. And although bystanders saw nothing of the robot itself, expectations are already running high. . . ."

(A YOUNG BUSINESSMAN, speaking to the microphone): "I can't wait to see it. This is gonna be one heck of a thing, I can tell you that. . . ."

(CLIP from the promotional video of the XCA–115.)

"The robot, known as the XCA–115 Kyojin–1, or 'giant' in Japanese, was recently purchased from the Yuji Corporation by St. Louis arena promotor Big Muddy Productions. It is expected to be making its debut six weeks from now at Busch Stadium during Monster Truck Rally '97. . . ."

(EDDIE JOE CARLISLE to microphone): "We're really proud to be bringing the Kyojin to audiences here in St. Louis and other venues in the South and Midwest. It's a unique, one-of-a-kind machine, and we know the fans will get their money's worth when they see this big guy in action. . . ."

(REPORTER on screen): "Although Big Muddy Productions is not allowing anyone to see the Kyojin–1 until its first appearance at Monster Truck Rally, the company promises a show to rival the Cardinals' opening day game for popularity. For News Channel Five, this is Laura Sumner. . . ."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Donnie Hale: former driver of the XCA–115

There were quite a few professional drivers who wanted to take a crack at riding the robot. (*Laughs.*) Hell, not just drivers either, but everyone you could *imagine*, once word got out that Big Muddy was lookin' for an American to take the stick. Test pilots, bulldozer and fork lift operators, computer freaks. And lots of danger nuts, rambos and bungee-cord jumpers and so forth. Everyone who wanted to sit in the pilot's seat wrote letters and made phone calls to Eddie Joe. Shit, they had to hire another secretary, just to answer the mail and handle the phones.

But Eddie knew that he wanted a stock-car driver, so he called up maybe a dozen guys who had worked for him before and asked us to come to St. Louis to do interviews. I lived nearby out in Booneville, so I said, "Sure, what the fuck," and drove into the city. And, y'know, to make a long story short, he gave me the job.

What . . . ? Why did he pick *me*? (*Smiles.*) Well, first thing Eddie asks me, he says, "Donnie, are you still married?" And I say, "Ed, the missus left me six months ago for a college professor and took the kids with her, you know that." Then he says, "Is your health insurance paid up?" And I say, "Hey, man, I've been in and out of the hospital three zillion times in the last ten years. My doctor just bought himself a place on Fire Island from all the business I've given him and I've even started dating his receptionist. Allstate gets the first check I cut each month. What the fuck do you *think?*" So he nods and says, "Are you sure you can handle a fifty-foot robot which could cream your car by just farting on it?" And I said, "Yes, if you pay me." And then he just grins and says, "You're my boy."

Well, next thing I know, I'm on a plane to Tokyo, where I spent the next month out there in Yuji's VR simulators, learning how to handle the system. The company's U.S. sales rep, Tazi, took me out there, even played the first few rounds against me . . . sumbitch, even one of their salesmen was able to kick my ass at first, it was so weird. Y'know, sort of like learning how to steer with your feet and shift-and-clutch with your hands . . . and the guys running the simulators really rode me hard, making sure I got it straight.

But anyway, I pretty much got the hang of things by the time I was ready to come home. Eddie himself picked me up at the airport, and even though I was jet lagged like crazy, he drove me straight to his office. "I got a present for you," he says when we get there. "Something that'll put your name up in the bright lights."

Then he gives me a box with a red ribbon tied around it, and when I open it up, inside's this silver one-piece crashsuit . . . big Old Glory patch on the back, my name stitched on the front, all sorts of sponsor patches on the thing. Looked tight enough for me to need a truss just to get in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it. And right on top is a big, white cowboy hat with a lil' green dinosaur patch on the front, and a word printed on it . . . "Mudzilla."

I look at this and the first thing I say is, "*Mudzilla?* What kind of name is *that?*" And he just smiles and says, "You don't really expect me to call it a Jap name, do you?"

"It's coming . . . !"

(CLOSE-UP of an immense mechanical boot crushing a Honda Civic: slow-motion shot of its top being pulverized, window glass shattering, hood and trunk hatches kicking open, doors blowing off their hinges. Heavy-metal soundtrack, slowly rising.)

"It's *big* . . . !"

(MEDIUM SHOT of two enormous fists pulling a bridge-cable, slowly hauling an exhaust-fuming, rubber-peeling Peterbilt tractor-trailer rig backward through rising dust.)

"It's *dangerous* . . . !"

(DISTANT SHOT through nocturnal fog and hazy half-light, as a shadowy behemoth slowly marches toward the camera, then stops and raises its menacing claws toward the night sky.)

"And it doesn't pay parking tickets . . . !"

(ZOOM IN on the juggernaut as an array of spotlights flash on, exposing every sleek and frightening inch of its fuselage, until the camera centers on the chestplate beneath the cockpit, which has been painted with the picture of a tyrannosaurus holding a Confederate flag, as the music reaches a loud, screaming crescendo.)

"Mudzilla is here!"

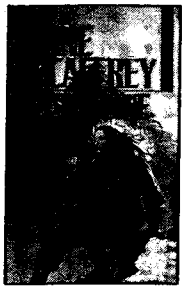
(Ten second FREEZE-FRAME for local ad insert.)

Eddie Joe Carlisle:

We saturated ads on all the local TV and radio stations for four straight weeks, getting everyone primed for Mudzilla's debut at the Monster Truck Rally. It cost us a bundle, almost as much as the 'bot itself . . . well, maybe I shouldn't talk about that . . . anyway, by the time we were through, every man, woman, and yard monkey in three states knew about Mudzilla. It wasn't just a show, it was a news event . . . and, boy, did it pay off!

There's exactly 54,224 seats in Busch Stadium, and we sold out every blessed one of them. Shit, the day of the show, there were scalpers out on the sidewalk hawking tickets for a hundred bucks a pop, and that was for the nosebleed section. We had the mayor and the whole city council shoved into the home-plate section, plus some local celebs you've never heard of, all schmoozing away, and meanwhile there's jokers trying to crash the gate out front, helicopters up in the sky, TV people going

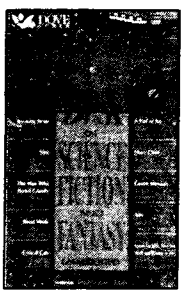
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



DOVE AUDIO

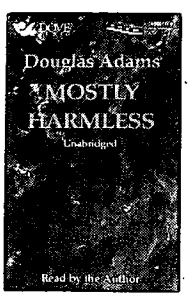
CRYSTAL LINE
by Anne McCaffrey
Read by Adrienne Barbeau

The continuing adventure saga featuring the daring exploits of heroine, Killashandra Ree.
ABRIDGED
2 Cassettes Approx. 3 Hrs. $16.95



BEST OF SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY
stories by Issac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke & others
Various Celebrity Readers

Ten journeys into the imaginations of today's best science fiction and fantasy writers.
UNABRIDGED SHORT STORIES
4 Cassettes Approx. 6 Hrs. $24.95



MOSTLY HARMLESS
by Douglas Adams
Read by the author

At last, the long-awaited fifth book in the increasingly inaccurately named Hitchhiker's Trilogy
UNABRIDGED
4 Cassettes Approx. 6 Hrs. $24.95

Please mail your order with a check to:
DOVE AUDIO, INC.
301 N. Canon Dr. Ste. 203
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

____ CRYSTAL LINE $16.95
____ BEST OF SF/FANTASY $24.95
____ MOSTLY HARMLESS $24.95

Name _____
Address _____
_____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

Subtotal _____
Sales tax CA residents 8.25% _____
$3.50 shipping & handling _____
Grand Total _____

To order call toll free (800) 328-3683

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apeshit in the press section. . . . (*Sighs.*) Jeez, it was a goddamn circus. And I loved every minute of it.

We started off low-key. The national anthem. Everyone stands up and sits down. Then we put on an hour and a half of the same-ol' same-ol'—some funny-car stuff, a big-rig tractor-pull, a little ten-car demolition derby—just enough to whet everyone's appetite, sell some more hot dogs and beer. A lounge act out of Nashville, the Five Dudes, did a quick set during intermission while everyone went to the pot . . . and *then*, just when everyone was beginning to get bored, we broke out the big guns.

We dimmed the arena lights and put on some loud rock music . . . uh, yeah, "We Will Rock You" by Queen, if I remember right . . . we had it blasting out of every loudspeaker in the place, and *Wham wham WHAM! Wham wham WHAM!*, just awesome . . . and meanwhile, the big gates out in left field open up and out comes the tractor-trailer rig with this giant American flag draped over the back, and it arrives in the center of the field and stops, right in the middle of the floodlights, and the cheerleaders run out to surround it.

And then, right as the music hit the crescendo and everyone in the stadium was on the verge of going nuts, the girls pulled off the tarp. . . . (*Grins.*) And Mudzilla stood up for the first time in America.

Donnie Hale:

We did three more appearances at Busch Stadium, just enough to get some national media attention, and when the novelty began to wear out with the locals, we took the show on the road. After the first show, Eddie Joe had already begun to get offers from all over the country . . . there was a promoter in Los Angeles who was willing to lease a C–141B Starlifter to haul Mudzilla out for a gig at Dodgers Stadium frinstance . . . but Eddie wanted to keep the 'bot in the southern and midwestern states for the time being.

Hmm? Yeah, I thought it was kinda peculiar. We could have been hitting the big time. "Let's work out the bugs before we go big-time," that's what he told me. "I wanna be low-key for awhile." Didn't make sense but, hell, he was the boss, right?

Anyway, there were plenty of bugs left to work out of the system. Mudzilla was a pretty sophisticated piece of work, but it wasn't perfect. Grit would get into the hand-unit actuators, so they'd loose dexterity, and we had a real bitch of a time keeping the primary engine manifolds from overheating during the really hot days. During one show in Little Rock the right hip-mount froze up entirely, right in the middle of the show, so we had to shut it down and jimmy the thing right there in the middle of the racetrack. And one time in Memphis my helmet decided to go on the fritz while I was trying to haul a bus, which meant I had to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lose the VR and switch to manual override . . . royal pain in the ass, lemme tell you.

But we kept on doing it, y'know, and for awhile there it was pretty hot shit. Barnstorming from town to town, four support trucks with Mudzilla lashed down on the back of the big-ass GMC Aero Astro. Sometimes we'd roll into a city, to find kids in their hopped-up cars standing on the side of the highway, just waiting for us to arrive. Got a couple of motel chains to put us up for free during the tour, in exchange for adding their logos onto the robot. . . . (*Laughs.*) Man, we had so many sponsors for motor oil, soda pop, candy bars, and shit, Mudzilla started to look like a walking billboard.

It was a tough job, though, keeping the show fresh. When everyone sees TV news about how Mudzilla stomped a school bus in one place or dragged a bigfoot truck backward in another, they're not so surprised when you do the same thing *again*. So we had to keep coming up with new stuff. I might learn how to pick up a Toyota and drop-kick it halfway across a stadium . . . Eddie always made sure it was a *Japanese* car I demo'd . . . and it was a show-stopper in Bowling Green, but three dates later in Jacksonville it's already old news. On the other hand, we were never able to fire Mudzilla's cannons, except for dud rounds, because if we had opened up, we might have leveled the stadium. So we had to dream up more stuff all the time. Did we tug-of-war two Peterbilts in Atlanta? Okay, then let's do *three* in Birmingham, and so forth.

But we were doing pretty well, all the same. We dragged trucks and stepped on school buses and did crazy shit like that all over eight states, and for eighteen months it looked like the gravy train would never end. I had my own fan club for awhile . . . and, y'know, there were lots of lil' girls out there on the road who were willing to drop their pants for the guy who drove Mudzilla. (*Snickers.*) I couldn't complain. It beat hell out of the demolition derby, I'll tell you that.

What I *didn't* know, and neither did anyone else, was that everything wasn't right at the front office. I knew that Eddie Joe had laid out major bucks for the robot and that Yuji was supposed to be getting a regular cut of the action, but I thought that end of things was pretty much settled. Y'know, me and the road crew were getting paid every two weeks, and we were getting dividends from ticket sales and T-shirts and all that shit, so it never occurred to me that, deep down inside, Big Muddy Productions might not have been able to make all the ends meet.

(*Shakes his head.*) That was my big mistake, trusting him as much as I did. Turned out that Eddie wasn't able to keep his fingers out of the cookie jar, so to speak . . . and when push finally came to shove, the Japs sent the repo man.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Here comes the ultimate weapon . . . Mudzilla!"

(CLOSE-UP on a toy Mudzilla being pushed by a child's hand through a tabletop racetrack. Lights flash and electronic noises erupt as it knocks model cars out of its way and tramples miniature buildings.)

"It's mean! It's strong! It's the indomitable king of the demolition derby . . . until *now!*"

(EXTREME CLOSE-UP as another child pushes forward an almost identical robot, this one painted with the Rising Sun flag.)

"Look out . . . now there's *two* combat robots! Here comes Mudzilla's arch-nemesis from Japan, *Kyojin–2!*"

(MEDIUM SHOT as the two toys are slammed into each other, beating each other with their plastic fists.)

"Which will survive the Battle of the Giants. . . . Mudzilla or Kyojin–2? Only *you* can decide!"

(CLOSE-UP shot of two adolescent boys, howling delightedly at the camera): "We're into Mudzilla!"

(DISPLAY SHOT of the two toy robots.)

"The Mudzilla and Kyojin–2 action figures, from WarToy. Batteries sold separately."

Tazaki Norio:

The terms of the agreement made between my company and Big Muddy Productions were that Eddie Joe Carlisle would pay us five-hundred-thousand dollars as the initial down-payment for the XCA–115, plus 10 percent of the gross gate receipts for each appearance it made in the United States. It bothered us a little when he renamed the robot Mudzilla and began to use it for subtle . . . um, I believe the popular term is Jap-bashing . . . but as long as Yuji was being paid for our product, it was only a minor nuisance.

However, Mr. Carlisle did not adhere to the terms of our agreement. After we received the initial sum, we received another payment of about one hundred thousand dollars, which represented 10 percent of the gate receipts from Mudzilla's first appearance in St. Louis . . . but after that, the checks gradually began to get smaller and more infrequent, until, in early 1999, they ceased to arrive altogether.

Although he told us that Mudzilla was only doing a few shows outside Missouri, we knew that the Kyojin–1 was constantly touring the southern and midwestern states, and this led us to the unfortunate conclusion that Mr. Carlisle was cheating us. First, our lawyers contacted Mr. Carlisle and requested that he send us the complete financial records of each of Mudzilla's performances. He told us that he would do so, but these records were never sent. This forced us to demand an audit of his records by our accountants and legal counsel, to which he reluctantly complied.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STAR TREK® AUTOGRAPHED PLAQUES

Each limited edition photo plaque features an 8x10 color photo, personally autographed by your favorite Star Trek star!

- Deluxe wood plaque with black marble finish, ready to hang
- Each plaque is numbered, hand-signed, and limited to only 2,500
- Certificate of Authenticity, guaranteeing that the signature is genuine
- Original Star Trek characters, as well as Next Generation characters, available
- Perfect for bedroom, den or study
- Great gift idea for any Star Trek fan

Since each photo plaque is limited to only 2,500, a quick order is recommended. Credit card orders may call 609-354-9374 for immediate service. Or return the order form with your payment today!

ORDER FORM IASF 3

Original Star Trek

_____	Nimoy (Spock)	$149.95
_____	Shatner (Kirk)	$129.95
_____	Kelley (McCoy)	$119.95
_____	Doohan (Scotty)	$109.95
_____	Koenig (Chekov)	$109.95
_____	Nichols (Uhura)	$ 99.95
_____	Takei (Sulu)	$ 99.95

Next Generation

_____	Stewart (Picard)	$129.95
_____	Spiner (Data)	$ 99.95
_____	Dorn (Worf)	$ 99.95

Postage & Handling: Please add $8 for the first plaque ordered, and $2 for each additional plaque ordered.

Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. 30-day money back guarantee if not completely satisfied.

METHOD OF PAYMENT

_____ Check or Money Order enclosed for the total amount due.
(Make checks payable to Catch a Star Collectibles. NJ residents please add 6% sales tax.)

_____ Charge my: _____ MasterCard _____ Visa

Card# _____ Exp. Date _____

Signature _____

Phone _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

For Fastest Service on Credit Card Orders
Call 1-609-354-9374, M-F 9:00am-7:30pm
or Saturday 10:00am-4:00pm eastern time.

Send to: Catch A Star Collectibles
1951 Old Cuthbert Road
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034

STAR TREK®, STAR TREK®: THE NEXT GENERATION™ AND U.S.S. ENTERPRISE™ are trademarks of Paramount Pictures. ©1992 CSC

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When the audit showed that he was in arrears by . . . ah, a *considerable* sum of money . . . we demanded that he cease using the XCA–115 for live performances and return our property to us.

However, Mr. Carlisle continued to be uncooperative. First, he filed under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy laws, which shielded him from his creditors while he continued to stay in business. This meant that we could not immediately repossess the XCA–115. In the meantime, he continued to tour Mudzilla, which added further insult to injury. Although my company's attorneys continued to pursue the matter in court, we were aware that it could take months, if not years, to resolve the matter. Not only that, but considering the amount of damage being suffered by the XCA–115 each night what we would finally receive in the end would be a machine that had been battered to uselessness, plus the assets of a bankrupt company.

(*Smiles.*) However, we were not entirely without recourse. By this time, the *other* XCA–115 prototype, the Kyojin–2, had been successfully repaired and substantially upgraded by our engineering team. We had already been considering using it for much the same entertainment purposes as Mr. Carlisle had so successfully done with Mudzilla . . . in fact, we had already contacted a different promoter in Tennessee about representing Kyojin–2.

When I informed Mr. Yoji of Mr. Carlisle's intentions, he gave me a simple directive. "Teach the *gaijin* some manners," he said. "And you must do it personally." (*Pauses.*) And I knew exactly what he meant.

"*Gaaaawwwrrrggghhh!* Get on *down* to the Tennessee Speedway this Friday night for the *bawwwrrrroooggahhh* grudge match of the *century*, as Harpeth River Productions in conjunction with the Yuji Corporation and Pizza Trough presents *raaagghhh* Mudzilla versus Kyojin–2! *Oooorrawwwhhhh* mighty fists of pure power POWER collide for the first time anywhere for ONE NIGHT ONLY! *haaaawwwwnnnkk* with special guests, the Dobermann Clowns! Tickets ten-ninety-five for adults, five-ninety-five for children, available at all Granny's General Store, Video Wiz, and ComTix locations! *Gaarrrraaoooggghhh!* The ultimate BATTLE OF THE CENTURY this Friday night at the Speedway *harrruuuuummmmm!* BE THERE!

Eddie Joe Carlisle:

Yeah, I fell for it . . .

(*Sighs and shakes his head.*) Like a damn fool, I fell for it. When I heard that they were gonna use the other robot, I should have never sent Mudzilla down to Nashville. Shit, I should have been trying to protect my meal ticket instead. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Why *did* I? (*Laughs.*) Hell's bells, boy, do I look like the sort of guy who runs away from a fight? If I hadn't gone down there, I would have been called a woosie. I would have been the laughing stock of the whole industry. Not only *that*, but Kyojin–2 would have been called the champion, and before you know it, Mudzilla would have been reduced to playing the Buttfuck County fair.

I couldn't let *that* happen, no sir . . . so I called the guy at Harpeth River Productions and I said, "Sam, *my* robot can beat *your* robot with one arm strapped behind its back." Damn li'l Nashville yuppie says to me, "Eddie Joe, that isn't necessary, but if you want a blindfold during the show, just let me know and I'll be happy to give you one."

(*Sighs.*) Well, maybe I *didn't* do the wise thing by taking Mudzilla down to Nashville . . . but I didn't ask for no blindfold neither. Not even when the shit hit the fan.

"Tonight was a scene of incredible violence at the Tennessee Speedway as two rival combat robots, the world-famous Mudzilla and its Japanese twin, Kyojin–2, fought each other before a sell-out crowd. And in the end . . ."

(VIDEOTAPE CLIP, shot from the distance: the two robots face to face in the middle of a dusty racetrack beneath harsh white floodlight. They are battering each other with their fists, pieces of metal breaking off as nearby ground crew members run for cover, until Kyojin–2 unexpectedly slams its right fist straight into Mudzilla's chest and the huge machine topples backward onto the ground.)

"There was only one left standing . . . Kyojin-2. But even *then*, it was not over. . . ."

(Camera ZOOMS IN upon the fallen Mudzilla: the transparent canopy opens and the pilot, looking bewildered but unhurt, is helped out of the cockpit by two other men. They have barely cleared the area before Kyojin–2 begins to stamp upon Mudzilla. In the background, the sounds of angry shouting and booing can be heard from the bleachers.)

"Kyojin–2 waited until Mudzilla's driver, Donnie Hale, had been safely evacuated from his robot, before Kyojin's unidentified driver relentlessly reduced Mudzilla to a pile of junk. Yet despite the destruction of their favorite and the apparent unsportsmanlike conduct of the challenger, fans were not disappointed. . . ."

(CLOSE-UP of an audience member, a bearded young man wearing a CAT cap): "Hey, I hated to see Mudzilla get defeated and all that, but at least he went out in a blaze of fire! It was one hell of a show!"

(MEDIUM SHOT of the TV reporter, standing in front of the race track): "The owner of Mudzilla, Big Muddy Productions president Eddie Joe Carlisle, was on hand for the fight, but refused to comment on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

outcome. However, a spokesperson for the Yuji Corporation, the owner of Kyojin–2, issued a brief statement saying that this was the only appearance its machine would make in the United States, and that their robot would soon be returned to the company's headquarters in Japan, where it would be permanently retired. So it looks like robot fighting has both begun *and* ended here at the Tennessee Speedway. This is Lynn Kaufmann, on the scene for Eyewitness Thirty."

Donnie Hale:

When I was told, just before I climbed into Mudzilla for the last time, that the driver of the Kyojin was going to be none other than Tazaki Norio, I knew that I was going to get ripped out there. He had helped train me, and he had been the one who had come up with the idea of selling Mudzilla to Eddie Joe in the first place, so I knew he had to . . . y'know, save face by defeating it as well.

With me, it was just a job. I gave it my best shot, don't get me wrong . . . but Tazi had something to *prove*, and you just can't defeat a man who's determined like that. Maybe that's how we're always getting the Japanese wrong, when you stop and think about it. At least I'm grateful to him for letting me get out of the cockpit before he trashed Mudzilla once and for all. He just wanted to make sure Eddie Joe couldn't keep rippin' his company off, that's all, even if it meant destroying their own machine.

I'm out of the game for good now . . . back to demolition derby and all that. Yuji invited me to come back to Japan, because it's building a second generation of the XCA series and it wanted me to help train new drivers, but I said no, thanks anyway. Ridin' that monster *once* was enough.

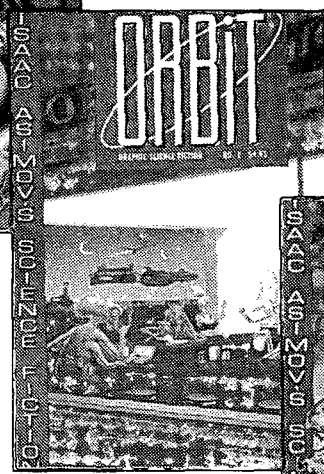
Hmm? How do I feel about it now? (*Grins.*) Hell, man, I wouldn't have missed it for the world! Custer didn't survive Little Big Horn, after all. . . .

But *me?* Hell . . . I was there for Mudzilla's Last Stand, and lived to tell the tale! ●

Customer Service or Subscriber Assistance
Please direct all changes of address
and subscription questions to:
Asimov's Science Fiction
P.O. Box 7058
Red Oak, IA 51591

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Special Offer For *Asimov's* Readers



ORBIT

VOLUMES 1 THROUGH 3, $4.95 EACH.

OR ORDER THE COMPLETE, THREE VOLUME SET FOR ONLY $9.95 (A 33% DISCOUNT!)

FIND THE BEST GRAPHIC SCIENCE FICTION IN *ORBIT*, THE GRAPHIC ANTHOLOGY *L.A. READER* CALLED "...THE BEST—IF NOT THE ONLY—WAY TO VISUALIZE [SCIENCE FICTION]." TOP AUTHORS FEATURED INCLUDE ISAAC ASIMOV, BEN BOVA, FREDERIK POHL, LUCIUS SHEPARD, LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS, AND OTHERS... AND THE ARTISTS INCLUDE AWARD-WINNERS SUCH AS JOHN BOLTON, DAVE STEVENS, JOHN POUND, AND TOM YEATES. GET INTO *ORBIT* TODAY!

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

❑ *ORBIT* #1 $4.95 ❑ *ORBIT* #2 $4.95 ❑ *ORBIT* #3 $4.95 ❑ ALL THREE $9.95

ADD $1.00 POSTAGE PER ORDER. SEND COUPON AND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER IN U.S. FUNDS TO:

DEPT. AS 013, ECLIPSE/ORBIT, P.O. BOX 1099, FORESTVILLE, CA 95436

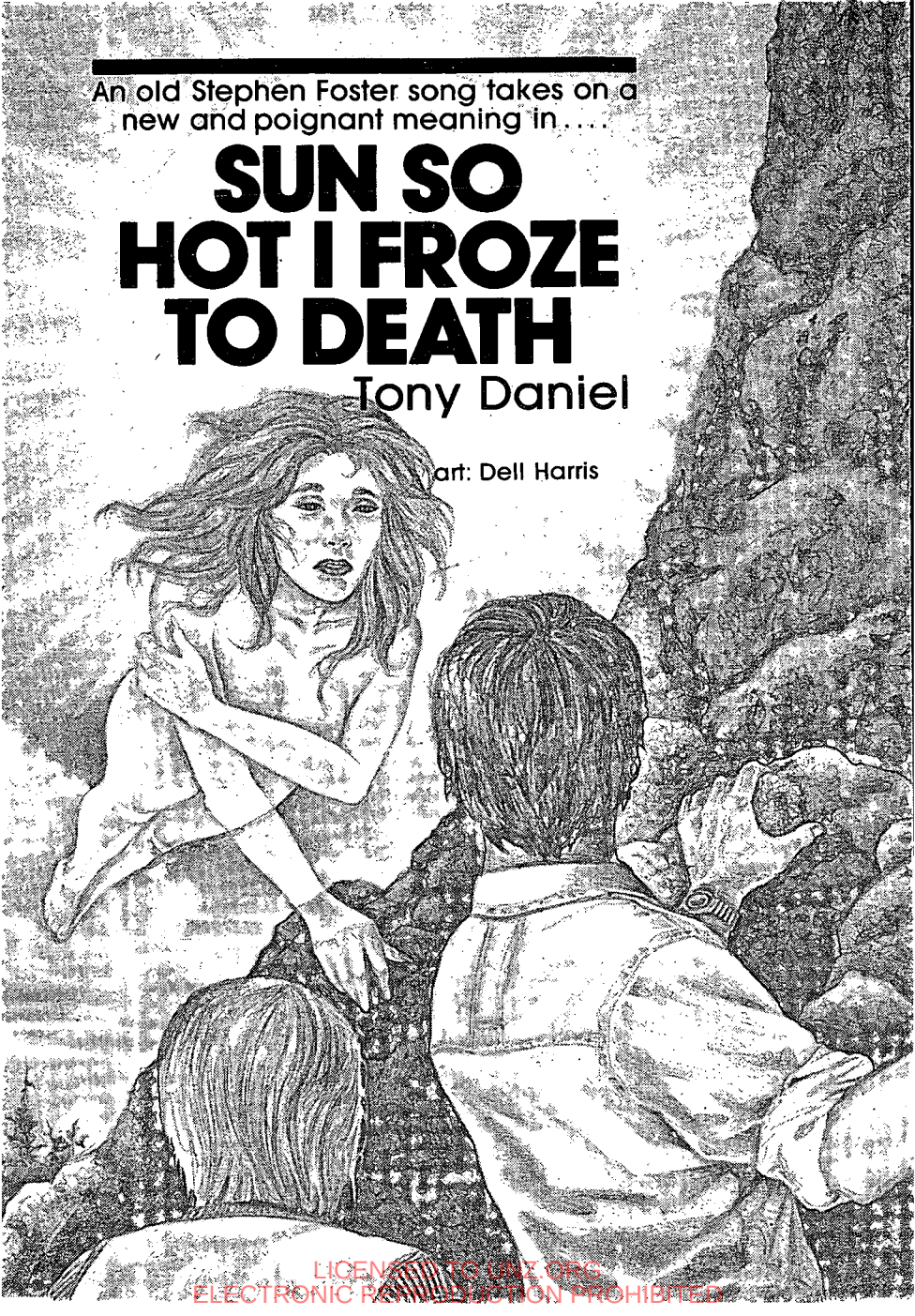
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

An old Stephen Foster song takes on a new and poignant meaning in....

SUN SO HOT I FROZE TO DEATH

Tony Daniel

art: Dell Harris



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I have always had an irrational fear of gravity reversing itself and me falling up into the sky. Or maybe it's a longing instead of a fear. Either way, sometimes this feeling overcomes me completely. Especially at night.

It's worse when I go home, back to where I'm from. Those Alabama nights hold a special kind of terror for me. Nights when the heat is rising off the pavement like steam from black coffee, when the stars bear down hard and prickly through the autumn humidity, are not full of monsters or rednecks with shotguns or even nameless, vague anxieties. It is just that it's harder to fully *believe* in gravity on nights like that. The stars tug at my shoulders and I feel myself rising, until I'm walking on tiptoes, my feet barely connected to the ground.

My best friend from high school is named Quinlan Turner. Quinlan and I used to sneak out on summer nights and ride our bikes around the neighborhood in the early morning hours. We didn't particularly need to do dastardly deeds. Our hearts were swollen and black and full of something that would not let us sleep. Once we brought along a ladder, rode along with it suspended between our bikes like a swaying, mobile bridge, and used it to climb on top of Merkinson's Super Valu, for the hell of it. On top, we hid among the hulks of air conditioners, fearing and longing for a police car to come by and *completely miss us*. Later, Quinlan betrayed me and took away my first love. But these days Quinlan isn't doing as well as I am in love. That is, he has not discovered how to either enjoy a relationship or stay clear of entanglement until he can. Occasionally, Quinlan invites me to come back and spend a few days with him and whoever is his current lover. When we get together, we forget about the bad times and remember those nights pumping our bikes along deserted streets, two panting moon shadows. Maybe on those nights my terror first developed, although what I remember of that time—when I was twelve or thirteen—is that life was a kind of constant, hoarse yell, with small spaces where I caught my breath in great gasps of surprise.

Usually most of a year passes before Quinlan invites me back to Alabama, back to Anniston, our hometown. Sometimes he comes to visit me wherever I am, though this happens less and less often. A few times, I have turned him down—when I'm busy, or not enough time has passed to make the trip back worth it. I'm completely free to go back or not. I work as an office temporary during the days, and play bluegrass banjo at night. My banjo, though it *is* what I live for, will never pay all of my bills. I've accepted this fact. Nevertheless, I like to live under the impression that it does. Hence the temp work. At work, nobody knows that I'm a musician, and I change jobs every few weeks anyway. I preserve an air of amiable dullness, rarely speaking unless spoken to. I do

DIGITIZED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not carry my work home with me. The moment I enter my apartment and see my banjo case, I go through a quick transformation. My body loosens, I change into jeans and some variation on a sweatshirt, my mind—banked and dormant from nine to five—fires up. I put on a good CD and smile at the music. A girlfriend once said that I get *lankier,* of all things.

Over the past few years, I've rotated among several bluegrass groups who work the festivals and taverns around Seattle, Washington. I range from "The Snowy Mountain Cardinals," a combo wherein we all wear exactly the same blazers, cowboy hats, and bolo ties—red, of course—and hardly ever play anything besides Bill Monroe and gospel tunes, to "Grassomatick," a group where we use bluegrass as an ironic, post-modern weapon for deconstructing contemporary American culture. I know a lot of other musicians and groups, and frequently sit in on their sessions, so it is no great problem to find someone to substitute for me in the groups which I formally belong to when I want to take a month or so and go home. It's the simple truth that nobody is likely to get a better banjo player than me, and putting up with my occasional absences is not a great price to pay for having me most of the year.

Grassomatick knows me as Screech—a reflection of my style when playing for them—while The Snowy Mountain Cardinals call me Smoke. My name is Spurlington Cave, so naturally people come up with nicknames. I grew up as Spur, but left that name behind along with Anniston, Alabama. Nevertheless, Quinlan persists in calling me "Spur," or "Spelunker," or "Lunk," but I'm long past letting him get my goat, at least in little matters. I'm past giving a shit one way or another what anybody thinks about the life I lead. Not to say, however, that I've shut myself off from feeling altogether. I have my memories, and a heart that isn't entirely broken. Some nights it is all I can do to walk out from under a roof back to my car without being seized by terror and awe, or to look at even the plainest woman in the audience and not love her with all my heart.

Quinlan invited me back to Alabama recently, and I flew into Atlanta on a hot, windy October Thursday. I rented a car there, and drove the ninety miles west to Anniston. It was still daylight when I pulled into Quinlan's driveway. Quinlan lives in Golden Springs, the suburb where he and I grew up, in a little house that he rents from his grandmother. Driving through Golden Springs is a surrealist experience, what with all the new development and the natural *change* that grows over a place like oxide covering exposed metal. Things look oddly familiar and strangely different. The school, the grammar school where I spent six years of my life, is surrounded by new white trailers, modular classrooms

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I think they're called, connected willy-nilly by covered side walks to the main building, as if the school were alive and growing like kudzu. Merkinson's Super Valu is no more, and is sub-divided into boutique shops, including a dry cleaners, a used paperback book store, and a tanning salon. A tanning salon in Alabama seems incredibly decadent, in a way that rent-a-cancer places in pale Seattle never could be.

Quinlan wasn't home, but his latest girlfriend was, and she let me in. I don't think she was expecting me, and I had to explain a couple of times who I was and that I was not trying to sell her a banjo. She was a thin girl with a bright face and long teeth stained a beautiful ivory by cigarettes. Her name was Kelly Klellum. I used to never notice Southern accents before I moved to Seattle; well, maybe I *unconsciously* filed people by their accent's variations and gradations. Kelly had one of those north-east Alabama nasals that implies a self-made family, the middlest of middle class. Pretty similar to mine, actually. You could balance wealth and poverty on our accents like riders on either end of a seesaw board.

"Quinlan's working at the course until six," Kelly said. "Are you sure he knows you were coming?" She said it like she had made plans for her and Quinlan that didn't include *me*.

"He knew it would be sometime this week," I said, kind of nosing my way in through the front door. She had to let me in; I had nowhere else to stay. Quinlan is the only one from Anniston I've remained in any kind of regular contact with, and my parents long ago moved to Dallas, Texas.

Kelly saw that I intended to stay. She was relatively new to Quinlan, I thought, since she didn't know about his propensity for inviting people over, then forgetting that he'd done so. Her face was skeptical, but hinted at some warmth, a need to do what was proper.

"We're old friends," I said, and was through the door and into the living room. I set my banjo by the door. Kelly surrendered to the moment, and offered to get me iced tea and to call Quinlan.

Believe it or not, Quinlan derived most of his living from the eighteen holes of a miniature golf course. Putthead, I think it's called, or Putters, or somesuch. He also sells real estate and recharges fire extinguishers. He won the golf course and the extinguisher refill equipment in poker games and, who knows, maybe even the real estate license, too. He has a master's degree in biology that he never mentions. Every time I come to visit, Quinlan has a different car. This time, he came screeching into the driveway in a mud-specked, baby-blue Range Rover.

"Lunk-man!" he yelled from outside. I was drinking my tea and watching Kelly. When she saw that Quinlan really did know me and was actually excited, she smiled genuinely, and I admired her tanned face and teeth. I set the tea down on the coffee table—actually a cardboard box that Quinlan had draped some gingham material over—and went

DOWNLOADED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and stood beside the front door. Quinlan burst through, cracking the door into its doorjamb and rattling the house. I kept a hand on my banjo to keep it from falling.

"There are vile and evil deeds to be done in this sad, cruel world!" Quinlan called out, looking around wildly for me. Kelly seemed simultaneously fascinated and terrified.

"And we are the very ones to do them," I quietly replied. He spun around, took my hand, and pumped it.

"How are you doing, Quinlan?"

"Not bad, not bad." He said it as if he were distracted and his eyes quickly, unconsciously I'm sure, darted toward Kelly, as if there were something he didn't want to say in front of her. Quinlan was a great one for keeping secrets, for letting only special people who had passed some arcane test into his confidence. I probably passed mine sometime in grammar school. Test questions were things like: What did you think about that fumble in the fourth last night in the Falcons game? I passed with flying colors when I told him I'd been watching "Columbo." Then we proceeded to dissect the "Columbo," which he'd watched after all. Or maybe that was after we were friends. Quinlan retests you every few years.

He turned to Kelly and asked, "Kelly, was it my turn to make dinner tonight?"

"No, I was just going to—"

"Well, would you mind if me and Lunk here went out for a beer? I mean, I could bring you something."

There was never any mystery about Quinlan's continuous rollover of girlfriends. Kelly frowned, a little, and only at the outer edges of her lips.

"No, that's okay. I was wondering—"

"It's not a problem to bring you something."

"I can make myself something," she said, "sure. If you'll just—"

"Just what?" said Quinlan, sounding exasperated much too early.

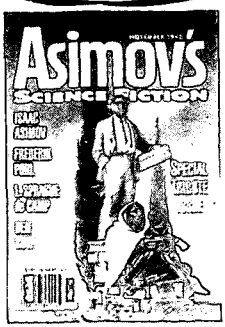
"Just tell me why you call him *Lunk;*" Kelly finally got out, and sent a smile along for good measure. She was okay. Quinlan always got the ones who were nice, then made them crazy and drove them off.

"Spurlington Cave," I said. "Cave." I raised my eyebrows for a sinister flourish. "Spe*lunk*er."

"Now I won't have to worry about *that* all evening," said Kelly, and stepped over to kiss Quinlan. He returned it with a mixture of pleasure and bewilderment. I felt like playing a closing trill on my banjo.

"I think I found out where Suzanne went," said Quinlan, low and deep. He was a dark form in the corner of the booth in Annie's, the only bar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



WRAP UP YOUR HOLIDAY GIFT GIVING

This holiday season give a subscription to **Asimov's Science Fiction.** It's the perfect gift and it will be appreciated through out the year.

Once-a-year holiday rates are now in effect. Your first gift subscription costs only $22.95 for 15 issues. Each additional gift subscription is even less--just $18.95 for 15 issues.

Analog Science Fiction & Fact Magazine is also available at these low holiday rates. The first subscription costs only $22.95 for 15 issues, each additional subscription costs only $18.95 for 15 issues.

Giving a gift subscription is easy. Just fill out the form below or if you prefer, call TOLL FREE 1-800-333-4108.

Mail To: Asimov's Science Fiction
P.O. Box 7058
Red Oak, IA 51591

- ❑ Payment enclosed.
- ❑ Bill me.
- ❑ Please, renew my own subscription.

Gift to: _____ Bill to: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

❑ Analog ❑ Asimov YPHA-7

Gift recipients will begin their subscription in January, with the current issue.

We publish two double issues, in April and November.
Each double issue counts as two towards your subscription.
Foreign orders please add $6.00, (cash with order US funds).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in town that wasn't a slap and tickle joint. A track light glanced our way, haloing Quinlan's black hair to a blueness and sparkling the amber in the stout on the table before him.

"She went to Nicaragua," I said.

"I've run into some weird shit since I saw you the last time," Quinlan replied, as if this followed logically. "I have reason to believe that Suzanne is still alive."

"Suzanne was killed in a bus in Nicaragua."

"Okay," he said, and took a long drink of his beer. "I mean, okay."

Something was troubling Quinlan, I was coming to see; this was no crude hoax-joke on a touchy subject he was trying to play on me. He chugged his beer and went to get another.

I looked around Annie's. Not much had changed. Wood, acoustic music, ferns, and cats. Tommy Silverwood, the guy who owned the place, was my old guitar teacher. He'd been the one who turned me on to banjo, when it became obvious I wasn't going to be content with only the one instrument. Tommy was a hell of a songwriter, but, unlike me, he didn't have the gumption or the stupidity to leave Anniston. He'd found a sort of ease as the best musician in town, a romantic soul among easily-impressed women. So he ran Annie's, and played guitar on weekends to calm the fevered and tortured souls of secretaries and lawyers. I had played here a few times, before I went off to college and then off to Greater America. Quinlan and Suzanne were in the audience those times, I remember, among about ten or twelve others. I told them all that Tommy Silverwood taught me everything I knew. I hadn't seen him around tonight. Sometimes I thought he avoided me.

Quinlan returned with a beer, and another bourbon for me. I like a touch of sugar in mine, and usually Quinlan watches in mock fascination as I empty one of those paper sugar packets into the glass, then makes a death-rattle gurgle as I take the first test sip. Tonight he stared into his beer and said nothing. I could see that I'd have wasted my airfare down if I didn't call him out on whatever was bothering him and let him have his say, however painful and futile it might turn out to be.

"All right, Quinlan, what's this about Suzanne?"

He began to speak in a clear, rehearsed voice, as if he had what he wanted to say all planned out, and was merely waiting for me to unblock the dam.

"Kelly and me went for a ride around to the other side of Cheaha Mountain the other day—" Cheaha was the highest point in Alabama, a few miles out of town. "—back to where that Boy Scout trail ends. The place with all the waterfalls."

I nodded. He was talking about the lower Odum, where an astonishing, nearly unknown tier of water cascaded through shattered granite, oaks,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and pines down Cheaha's spine, scattering in rocky waterfalls and gathering in still, cold pools. We'd gone there in high school to drink beer and skinny dip when the weather was right. No redneck hordes, no country club pool crowd.

"I . . . Kelly and I made love up near the top falls, where nobody ever, ever comes. And it was cold, but I was feeling pretty frisky, so I ran on over and dove into the pool. Cold as hell, like always. I was shivering and screaming like a banshee underwater and I opened my eyes—"

Quinlan paused, took a small, throat-wetting sip of his beer.

"Suzanne was there. *There,* underwater, *looking* at me. Hanging there in the water like some sort of . . . she didn't smile. But there wasn't anything like pain or sadness on her face like you'd expect of a . . . ghost.

"Quinlan, you can't—"

"And her hair was all flowing out. She was . . . not clothed. Pale. But she always had china doll skin."

All I could think at that moment was: *I never knew what she looked like naked, Quinlan.*

"She reached out for me, Lunk. Or she raised her hand or something. I don't know; I freaked out. I surfaced like a dog throwing water and hightailed it out of the pool. Banged up my feet pretty good on the rocks. Then I breathed real hard at the shore, and almost sucked my scrotum up into my belly when Kelly touched me on the shoulder. I looked back at the pool then, and Suzanne was gone."

"The water. It must have shocked your senses."

Quinlan took a breath; his knuckles were white and tight around his beer. With a sigh, as if a load had been lifted, a spring unwound, he slumped back into the darkness behind him. His voice came from the shadows with a quiet intensity.

"It was real, Lunk. *Real.*"

And then, so help me, I liked to've jumped out of *my* very skin when Tommy Silverwood laid a tentative hand on my shoulder.

"Spur," he said. "Where's your banjo?"

"I don't have it," I said, still staring at Quinlan. "Here. I mean, I do have it *here.* In town."

Tommy pulled up a chair and looked at me kind of abjectly and apologetically. "I'm playing tomorrow night. Bring it in and we can jam like old times."

"Yeah. I can do that, Tommy."

And Tommy and I spent an hour talking about music and making a living and old tunes that we remembered fondly but hardly ever played anymore. As Quinlan and I walked out, silently, to Quinlan's Range Rover, I could swear that that star-spattered sky above was going to swallow me whole.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

The next day Quinlan took off from work, and he and I went up to the lower Odum, to the pool where Suzanne may or may not have appeared. The sun was bright in a slate-blue sky. Cirrus clouds curled in crystalline lines high above. This usually meant a big front was on its way through—which, in Alabama, brings fire-and-brimstone storms and the odd tornado or two. The leaves crackled under our shoes as if we were walking through a small brush fire; they were flaming in reds and yellows, to add to the illusion.

Even without a ghost, this place brought back some painful memories to me. This was our place; Muscadine Murderers, Inc., Suzanne had called the three of us, since we all discovered that we loved wild grapes and tromping through the woods to find them. These woods were full of the best of muscadines, if you knew where to look, and knew enough not to eat them before they came into season. Unripe muscadines are so sour that they make you want to disinherit your children, even if you don't have any. We also murdered muscadines by cutting off the vines at the root and making swings out of them. One summer at this very pool, Quinlan had cut a vine swing that arced out over the water, so that if you dropped off at the highest part of the arc, you could fall into water that was deep enough to keep the rocks on the bottom from breaking your neck. All summer and into fall, that muscadine vine kept a tenacious hold on the tree branches it had climbed up into, as if some vegetable rigor mortis had crept into its tendrils. It took all three of us, hanging onto the vine together like ticks on a dog's ear, to finally pull the supports out of the trees. By then it was autumn, and we were all clothed. We crashed into the October water like startled birds slamming into sliding glass windows. We screamed out of that pool as if we'd got glass shards down our jeans.

"Do you remember falling in that time?" I asked Quinlan. We were standing at the pool's edge, gazing down through the clear, empty water. "It was about this time of year."

"We were in Suzanne's old brown truck," he said. "The one with the white camper shell." With his toe, he flipped a rock into the water. "Suzanne nearly killed us driving back to Anniston on those windy roads down the mountain."

It all started coming back to *me* then. They'd dropped me off at my house and I'd stood in the driveway, dripping, listening to Suzanne and Quinlan laugh as she tore down the street. Toward *her* house.

I felt a flush coming over me, standing by that pool, and in the chilly air I was doubly warm. I hadn't felt this kind of emotion since . . . well, since a long time ago. I couldn't believe what I was about to say, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

listened in horror as my mouth formed the words, as my vocal chords sounded them.

"Guess you knew that truck pretty well."

Quinlan looked at me with a pained expression.

"Especially the inside of that camper shell." I choked on a string of spit then, and turned away while I coughed it out of my lungs. This gave my conscious mind long enough to take back control of my speech mechanisms. Really, I thought, you've spent years getting over that, burying it deep, letting it rot and decay to dirt. What's the use in digging all that up all over again? It is like work during the day and music at night: what is, and what might have been.

When I finished coughing, Quinlan had walked to the other side of the pool, almost underneath the waterfall. It was about fifteen feet high, and was roaring full torrent, as if in anticipation of the coming rain. Keeping his back against the rock, he inched his way behind the falls, so that he was a blurred image through the spray. Impetuous as always, Quinlan thrust his arms through the cascading water so that two distinct hands reached out from the ghost behind the falls.

"I am the spirit of Chinabee Creek," he cried over the roar of water. "Join me in eternal wetness."

You couldn't stay mad at Quinlan long.

And, no matter what had happened, whether I felt betrayed or released by Suzanne that day long ago, or later in college, when she and Quinlan had moved in together, or the day she left for Nicaragua, those feelings were past, dead, dust. That was how I *used* to feel. Now I had a friendship with a living man that I wanted to hang onto.

"Let's go climb Pulpit Rock, oh Naiad of my dreams," I called back across the pool.

We drove on up to the top of Cheaha, out to the granite edge of the mountain. Now calling these Appalachian foothills "mountains" is maybe stretching things a bit, especially now that I've seen the Rockies and the Olympics and great Mount Rainier. If you fell off Rainier, you'd accelerate downward to your death at thirty-two feet per second, no turning back. If you fall off an Appalachian "mountain," most likely you will roll gently down a pine-needle covered hillock until you come to rest in a bower of fallen oak and hickory leaves. But Pulpit Rock was one place where the Appalachians got slightly dangerous, with about a fifty-foot drop into broken bottles and old beer cans if you weren't careful. Nevertheless, I have always been a competent rock climber, and, since coming west, I'd climbed in the Sierras once or twice; there were not many faces in Alabama that would make me think twice about scaling them. Quinlan had no formal training, but he was a natural at anything risky and pointless.

DIGITIZED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pulpit Rock was a place the Muscadine Murderers had started coming to later, after we were all in college in Birmingham and wanted a place to come on the weekends that was near home, but did not require us to return to a town full of old acquaintances that we had, quite frankly, gone to college to get *away* from. By that time, Suzanne and I had taken a rock-climbing class together, so we pretty much knew what we were doing. Quinlan came along mostly for the thrill, and to be with us.

At that time, Quinlan and Suzanne had not moved in together. That happened our senior year. I was under the mistaken impression, brought about more from the secret turnings and longings of my own heart than by anything either of them had said or done, that, while they'd had their fling in high school, now Suzanne was wise to Quinlan's ways. It would only be a matter of time before she did the sensible thing, and fell in love with me. I was, you'll have guessed, completely in love with *her*. Even I am not sure why this love was not only something that was unshakable in me, and long lasting, but necessary; it was something I *needed,* that sustained me when all else in life, even my music, seemed a pointless progression toward dissolution and doom. At first glance, Suzanne was nothing special to look at, an Alabama hill girl, all mousy and a bit plump. But there was a grace to her movements and her manner of being, so that once you knew her, you'd think of her only as full and lush. Her hair was the color of soft leafmeal on a forest floor, her eyes as brown and powerful as a Southern river. Always, she smelled of rain. But despite all of the earth and woods that was in her, she was not the soul of the Murderers—that was either me, with my banjo and my desire, or else we were soulless. Quinlan was our heart, our courage. Suzanne was our brain. It was this that attracted me to her more than anything else, for, as I have told you, I am often gripped with morning exaltations and midnight terrors which I can neither explain nor control. Suzanne was a psychology-philosophy double-major, and she could sometimes give me a piece of her mind to hold onto when the going got particularly bad.

So Quinlan and I free-climbed the last place where the three of us had been truly happy. Climbing without ropes or protection is stupid, but we were bouldering mostly, working our way horizontally across Pulpit Rock's base, about ten feet off the ground. Both of us wanted to climb, so neither of us spotted the other from the ground; spotting is good technique if you're bouldering. But what the hell, driving back to town along Cheaha's whipcrack of a road would probably be more dangerous. This sort of thinking felt strange to me, but natural when I was with Quinlan. I figured I'd spent most of the year building up my safety karma points, so I could spend a few without worrying about running out.

After powering my way across a stretch with few holds, I got my foot onto a thin ledge and cleaned out a crack with a few flicks of my fingers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Black widows liked to hang out in the interstices of Pulpit Rock, waiting, perhaps, for new grooms to eat. After I was sure the crack was empty, I made a handjamb in it, and rested for a moment, watching the morning sun stream through the trees, and watching Quinlan, with more grace than I would ever have, skirt the stretch that had just given me so much trouble with the ease of a cat. He found a stable hold and settled beside me.

"I was just remembering," he said. "You and Suzanne were talking about falling or something when we were all here last."

"Psychology for *avoiding* falling," I said. I remembered the conversation well. "And philosophy for when you fall anyway."

"You were talking about falling into the sky," said Quinlan. He sure had a dagger of a memory when he chose to use it.

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Let's not talk about that now," I gestured downward. "This might not be the place to discuss it."

He was quiet for a second, tighter, as if he were trying to hold back something he wanted to say, since I'd asked him to, but was having to fight his desire to blurt it out anyway. As usual, he went ahead and said it.

"I was thinking maybe what you and Suzanne were talking about was important."

"In what way?"

"In . . . maybe it had something to do with her coming back."

"I don't think so," I said. I made to climb farther along.

"I do," said Quinlan.

With a sigh, I got back into my holding position. "All right. I sometimes get a crazy notion that I'm going to fall up into the sky, especially at night. Suzanne told me some stuff about common phobias, and I said I didn't think it fit in with any of those. Then she started talking about William James and association of perceptions and shit like that."

"But you followed her," Quinlan said. "You were listening real carefully, I remember."

"Okay, yes. I think I did. She said that maybe it wasn't craziness after all. Maybe I was . . . knowing something. Understanding something about the human mind without observing it. Just living built-in innate knowledge exactly as if I'd experienced it."

"Knowledge of what?"

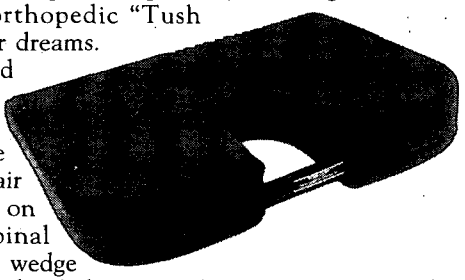
I turned toward the rock face, scraped at a bit of lichen with my free hand. "I don't know. She got technical. Told me about some trick she'd come up with, something that the psychologists could never see because

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ORDER MALL

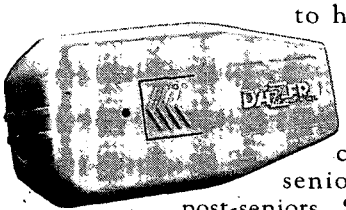
TUSH CUSH

Are you one of the millions of Americans who suffer from low back pain? Do hours of prolonged sitting leave you aching or numb? If so, the revolutionary orthopedic "Tush Cush" is the seat of your dreams. This scientifically designed seat works to relieve and prevent back pain in 2 ways: first, it suspends the tail bone (coccyx) in the air and reduces the pressure on and within the lower spinal discs; second, the unique wedge shape tips the pelvis forward to help restore the spine's natural lumbar curve. Constructed of highly resilient polyurethane foam, the "Tush Cush" comes with a removable, machine washable, dark brown cover. It measures 14"x18" and features a handle for easy toting. Perfect for home, office, auto, sporting events, theaters, wheel chairs-or anywhere your "tush" needs a "cush"ion! **$39.98** ($5.75) #A1967



HELPFUL TO HUMANS HARMLESS TO DOGS

Even the most dedicated canine afficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4 3/4" long) plastic case can also clip on belt , takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids-plus the pro-verbial post-seniors. **$29.98** ($3.75) #A1829X

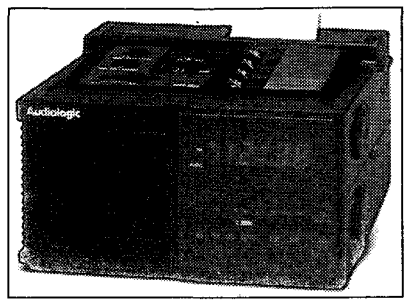


TO ORDER . . .
by mail send check or credit card number and expiration date to:
CALL TOLL FREE 24 HOURS A DAY **1-800-722-9999**
MASTERCARD/VISA AMERICAN EXPRESS
30 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE•For Exchange or Refund
For each item add shipping and handling charge shown ( )
to arrive at total price. NJ residents add 7% sales tax.

MAIL ORDER MALL,
Dept. 013 AS
PO Box 3006,
Lakewood, NJ
08701

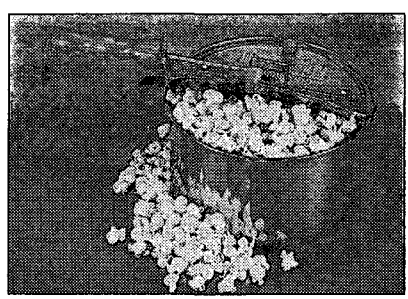
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER



Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audio Logic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the Sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! $89.98 ($6.95) #A2000

GOURMET POPCORN POPPER



The incredible Theater II through-the handle, bottom-stirring popcorn popper uses stovetop power to reach the same temperature (465°F) as commercial poppers. Popcorn explodes to full expansion, steam damage is el-iminated, a faster finish preserves tenderness, and nearly 100% of the popcorn pops! Result: six quarts of the best popcorn you've ever tasted..in just three minutes start to finish. Faster than most microwaves, Wooden handle for a safe grip, and pops with a minimum amount of oil or butter for delicious diet popcorn. (approximately 500 calories per 6 quart). Produces tender, fluffy, old-fashioned movie theater popcorn in just minutes. Made in USA $27.98 ($5.75) #A1963

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they thought of everything as gray matter and electricity. And the philosophers wouldn't stop speculating long enough to make a few simple observations."

Without missing a beat, Quinlan shifted his balance so that he could put his hand on my shoulder. He gave it a squeeze.

"What was the trick, Lunk?"

"Something about finding a way to look at her own mind."

"Like thinking about thinking?"

"No. No," but now *I* was thinking about how to *say* what Suzanne had told me. I was wondering if I'd understood her at all. I looked up, up the face of the rock, and remembered. Suzanne, climbing and talking at the same time. Quinlan had been on top, eating one of the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches we'd brought along. I'd been on the ground below, belaying Suzanne, trying to keep my balance on all the old Coke cans, crumpled cigarette packs, and stinky used rubbers.

"The mind," she'd said, "is a pattern that makes *other* patterns. Everything in the world is just a pattern our minds make out of who-knows-what. The world and our minds are like those acrobats who lock hands and flip over each other like a slinky. I think that what you're afraid of, Spur, when you feel like you're going to fall up into the sky, is that your mind is going to *let go*"—here, she almost let go of Pulpit Rock herself, trying to make her point—"and you're going to go spinning off into nothingness."

And I remember that all I could think about was the way the sunlight caught her brown hair and colored it the red of blood and rubies. And I thought that I would never, never understand why she did not love me, love me like a woman loves a man.

"Quinlan," I said, back in the Suzanneless present. "I think she figured out how to let go."

"She what?"

Then she was there, a silhouette in the October sunlight, just the way I'd remembered. Or was the convoluted granite of Pulpit Rock playing tricks on my mind? No, no, she was hanging there beside the rock like clinging mist. I blinked the light from my eyes, looked hard.

"Quinlan, she's here," I whispered.

Quinlan didn't respond at first. When he did, he sounded disappointed, dismayed. "I can't see anything. The sun gets in my eyes."

Suzanne touched the side of the cliff as if she were leaning against a convenient wall. She gazed down at me, and now I could make out her face.

Sad. Almost to tears, or after tears, when all the crying has saved no one, done nothing.

"Suzanne," I said. My voice held no emotion. For how could I express

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a turn of phrase, an inflection, how I felt? Years. *Years* I had loved her. Even when she and Quinlan were living together, the hidden fire smoldered. Then, after their falling out, on that night full of crazy, spinning stars when I'd told her, finally, finally *told* her. And she'd been surprised, shocked, bewildered.

And sad. Sad the way she was now, looking down at me with infinite remorse.

"Suzanne."

With a movement of her hand, Suzanne set her self spinning about, upside down, but as graceful as a squirrel who has decided to climb back down a tree trunk.

When she was turned completely around, her face was inches from my own. I could see the sun through her features. I could see the silhouettes of trees which grew at the crest of the rock. I began to be very afraid. She whispered to me—or else the wind blew, the leaves shuddered.

"Play me," the wind said, the leaves said. "Play me."

She floated closer to me then and, after all those years of wanting her close, wanting to become a part of her, I was terrified—deep in my gut I was terrified. I drew back, downward. I let go of the rock and tumbled backward, flailing my arms before my face, trying to get away from what I had loved most in the world, what I had prepared myself—through long and empty nights—never to see again.

Quinlan caught me. With an effort few other people could have mustered, he held me with one arm, stopped my fall, and pulled me back to the rock. He took my hand, slid it back into a crack.

"Jam," he said. "Goddamnit, Lunkman, jam!"

I bunched my hand into a fist and reattached myself to the world. Blinking tears and dirt from my eyes, I looked wildly about. Suzanne was gone.

On the way back, Quinlan seemed to take it as a personal affront that Suzanne had not appeared again to *him*, or at least to *both* of us. As we wound down the road, he alternated between furious silence and insinuating that it was, somehow, *my* fault. He did this by the pretext of discussing what had happened with me, but I could hear envy in his every word. I knew what it was because I'd heard it before, a long time ago, the spring of our senior year, when Suzanne had finally had enough of Quinlan and had left him.

He had come to me, just as Suzanne did, and discovered her there, in my apartment, at three o'clock in the morning. Without a word, she left. Quinlan lit into me, accusing me of doing vile and horrible things to him—things I'd only dreamed of doing and never could, because Suzanne did not want me. I tried to tell him this. I tried to tell him about the look

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of betrayal that had come over her when I told her that I loved her, as if I were a last refuge turning her away, setting her adrift.

Neither one of us had ever heard Suzanne speak another word.

She volunteered for some Sandalista work, getting in the Nicaraguan coffee harvest. Suzanne had always been fond of revolutions, and her Spanish, like her German, French, and Japanese, was excellent. Quinlan had been the first one to find out about the bus, from Suzanne's mother. He'd called me, simultaneously making up with me and breaking the bad news. I was in Dallas, where I was spending the summer with my parents, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life now that I'd read the great books and found out that they could not tell me what it was all about, either.

"Contras," Quinlan said. "Or government troops. Nobody knows. It hit a mine. Blew all the hell up. Suzanne was killed instantly, they said."

Died years ago. Blew all the hell up. Or was it, after all, mine and Quinlan's fault? Did she want to slip away, away from the men who were twisting her between them as if they were wringing out a towel? She had the motive. Had she discovered some long-hidden means sewn into the matter of her brain, like a rip flap in a balloon's fabric? Was Nicaragua not far enough away?

"She let go," I said, interrupting Quinlan in the middle of asking a question.

"How the hell would *you* know?" said Quinlan. He was alternating between looking hard at me and glancing at the road as he drove the Range Rover down the switchbacks. He gave me a glare, then jerked the wheel to avoid running off the road at a particularly sharp curve.

"I don't," I said. "I don't know anything."

"Damn right. And you never *did*. You never knew *her*, either."

"I loved her."

Quinlan put the brakes on hard, slowing down so that he could make his point without watching the road.

"You loved something in your imagination," he said. "You didn't love *Suzanne*."

Then, after a moment, "Not like I did."

This was too much for me. How *dare* he? After all the shit I'd put up with, the feelings I'd stifled because he was my friend.

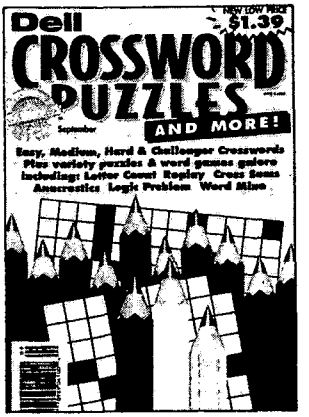
"Like *you* did? You never fucking loved a woman in your *life*, Quinlan. It's *games* with you, man. You like to be admired. You like the danger, the chance you'll fail. When that's all gone, you leave them. Or you leave them alone, whether you're still there or not."

Quinlan was blushing and breaking out in little beads of sweat along his forehead. He rarely blushed, and though the day was close and warm

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLUE: IT WILL TANTALIZE AND CHALLENGE YOU EVERY MONTH

ANSWER: DELL CROSSWORD PUZZLES



Each issue is packed with Crossword Puzzles from easy to challenger; Variety Puzzles such as Cross Sums, Anacrostics, Kriss Krosses and much more!

Subscribe today!

❑ Yes, send me 24 issues for only $29.94.
❑ Send me 12 issues for $15.97.
❑ Payment enclosed. ❑ Bill me.

CALL TOLL FREE 1-800-234-2402

or

Mail to: Dell Magazines, PO Box 55079, Boulder CO 80322

Name_____

Address_____

City/St/Zip_____

Please allow four to six weeks for your first issue. Outside U.S. and Poss. add $3.00 per year. U.S. funds only.

5IAJ3

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

and ready to storm, when he was like *that,* it meant he was furious. He stopped the Range Rover, in the middle of the road.

"Hey, fuck you, man," he said, in a low monotone. "You are such an abstracted piece of shit! The only fucking thing *you* could ever love is your *banjo,* cause you can play any song you want on it and it doesn't talk back. The only thing that ever could satisfy *you* is jacking off to your imaginary, perfect woman—"

"Quinlan, there's a car—"

"—and let me tell *you* something, Spurlington. It ain't Suzanne. It wasn't ever *Suzanne.* All you ever did was mess up her head so she couldn't come back to *me.*"

"Quinlan."

"I loved her." He saw the approaching car, and, with incredible deftness, popped out the clutch and peeled off and out of the way. "*You* don't even know what the word means."

We drove back to his house, twenty miles, in silence. When we got there, I went inside, said a terse goodbye to Kelly, got my banjo, and left in my rented car.

I didn't go back to Atlanta, like I'd planned on doing while we were coming down from Cheaha. I spent the afternoon driving around my home town, missing the way things used to be, and generally feeling like a sorry old dog who just got run over by a garbage truck. It was amazing that I could spend eleven months feeling next to nothing, and then in two days go through such a range of emotions. Well, that's why I moved to Seattle, I told myself, so I wouldn't have to put *up* with shit like this. Then I got mad for thinking of myself as some kind of zombie, with banjo music the unholy electricity that kept the jaundiced light shining in my eyes.

I drove past Merkinson's Super Valu, looking at the roof to see if those air conditioners were still up there. Couldn't make out if they were. I turned into the back alley, behind the newly remodeled shopping center, and parked my car. There was a big dumpster back there still. Quinlan and I had tried to climb up the dumpster and from there get onto the roof, but had lacked the height to bridge the gap. That was what had prompted us to bring the ladder. These days, that roof didn't look so high at all. I got my banjo out of the car and had a stealthy look around. The alley was deserted for the moment. After rock climbing all morning, my sense of balance was well-honed. I scampered up on the dumpster, and pulled my banjo up with me. Then I reached for the roof. No problem. I put the banjo over the edge, and grabbed hold of it myself, and swung myself up in one quick movement. The air conditioners were there, still, to hide among. I do not know if anyone heard the eerie sound of sad songs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the banjo wafting down to the boutiques below me. Perhaps they did, and were too frightened and unbelieving to say anything. Sometimes I think we spend most of our lives frightened and unbelieving and too embarrassed to say anything.

I played all the sad songs. "This Lonesome Road," "Sweet Misery," "Hard Times Come Again No More," "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone," and I even sang along in my crackly high tenor with the last one, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." The air conditioners listened in contemplative silence, as storm clouds began to roll in across the sky above me. The air conditioners and brown clouds were a good audience for that kind of music.

So I decided to go and play at Annie's that night after all. I climbed down as quietly as I could, only to discover a woman dressed in a white jumpsuit, holding slackly onto a can of trash, watching me. Her skin was so dark for this time of year, she could only have got it baking under fake sunlight. Without a word, I put my banjo into my rented car, and drove away.

Tommy was finishing setting up when I got there. We went backstage and discussed what songs we would do that evening. It didn't take us long to remember all of those old songs we used to play together, when I was his student, and then, eventually, just somebody he liked jamming with. Tommy had come of age in the sixties, and, taking lessons from him, I'd cut my teeth on the folksy, silly, angry music of that time. Tommy catered mostly to people around his own age, and he liberally spiced all his sets with sixties standards. I went along with him tonight. What the hell; for me it was nostalgia of a different sort.

We went out to a nearly full house. It wasn't because of me being there; today was Friday. That's why I didn't notice Quinlan in the audience until we were halfway through the first number, a nice new-grass version of "You Can't Always Get What You Want," that Tommy and I had arranged years before. Tommy's mellow, but rugged voice carried the lyrics just right. Quinlan and Kelly were sitting to one side, up front at a table. Quinlan gave me a wave and a smile. He shrugged his shoulders.

Ah hell, I thought. I'll just think of him as an *imaginary, perfect* friend, and that way we can get along. I pointed a hot lick or two on the banjo in his and Kelly's direction as Tommy and I shut down the song.

After the opener, Tommy went into his introduction and welcome. I took a bow and claw-hammered a hello. Everybody seemed happy, or at least relieved that the week was over. We dove into the second number, obligatory for guitar and banjo ever since "Deliverance," "Dueling Banjos." I hated the song, but tried to give it its due. We got some applause, so, maybe I succeeded. We went on to "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," which was kind of truncated since we didn't have a mandolin, a bass, or

DIGITIZED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a fiddle. Nevertheless, I went to town, working in my fanciest licks. We got a lot more clapping for that one.

While the applause died down, Tommy adjusted his capo for "House of the Rising Sun," while I tuned up for it. Glancing up from tuning, I looked out at the audience, over toward Quinlan.

Suzanne was there, beside him. Smiling and clapping. No, that was Kelly. No, *Kelly* was on the other side of Quinlan. And Suzanne wasn't there any more.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my sleeve. So the ghost of our old girlfriend had come back to haunt us? What were we supposed to *do* about it? Run screaming through the night? Beg her to come back, even if she was nothing but thick air, smelling of the grave? I decided to get on with the show.

Halfway through the song, the edge of a spot caught some cigarette smoke that swirled into a face, a half-concealed torso. Suzanne mouthed words at me, imploring; I heard nothing. But I knew what she was saying.

"Play me."

The same words, strange, impossible, but on this night, they followed a smoky, haunted logic.

Staring at her, I missed a beat and it was all Tommy could do to cover for me and keep us from coming to a dead stop. We finished the song in a sloppy rush.

Play me, I thought. Play me.

Her song, of course, the song I'd forgotten, put out of my mind for years and years. At first I'd played it for her as a joke, a tease. But she'd come to love it, to ask me for it. And I'd come to play it as if it were a metaphysical anthem to the absurd universe, to a universe that would stuff love into my heart like an old blackbird, flapping around, banging things up, with no place to roost. I tuned up my banjo for it.

"I have a request from the audience," I said with a shaky voice into the microphone. The sound echoed in my ears. "For a solo."

"You do?" said Tommy, looking at me funny.

"I do." Firmer. Still a quiver. Fear? Longing? Both?

Tommy smiled, like he knew what was going on. Maybe he did. Tommy Silverwood had more to him than he normally let on. Most people do. "Go for it, son."

I looked over at Quinlan. He was sitting up straight, listening, wondering what I was about to pull.

"Ya'll know this one, by Mr. Stephen Foster. It's called 'Old Susannah,' " I said. "This one's for all the murdered Muscadines."

And Quinlan was standing up, staring at me, emotions I cannot begin to name playing across his face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I began to play.

And the words made sense. Rainy Seattle. Dry weather in Alabama, with a storm on the way. "Sun so hot, I froze to death . . . "

She was *there,* between Quinlan and me, curling into being out of smoke and heat and the close pressure of the coming rain.

I remember, I thought. Do *you* remember, Quinlan?

He saw her; he took a step toward her and swirled the air with his movement. For a second, she was gone. Quinlan did not move a muscle after that.

"I had a dream the other night, when everything was still. . . ."

What did Suzanne want? What did she *need?* I thought about the *trick,* about letting go of the world's pattern, your own pattern spinning away, spinning, too fast to grasp, too strong to set an anchor. And so she returned to the places that were the most real to her, that somehow were ingrained in *her* pattern, no matter how slippery the world became, how incomprehensible and alien. Suzanne was trying to come *home.* She needed a pattern. A match. She needed the mold from which her spirit was cast to reinhabit, to be reformed within the folds of memory.

"I thought I saw Susannah, coming down the hill. . . ."

Suzanne needed me. She needed Quinlan. She needed us to *remember* her home.

As I played and sang, I tried to imagine what it was like to be with Suzanne, her gestures, her face, the smell of rain. Like Quinlan said, I have an excellent imagination. Outside, the storm broke. Thunder was in the air. I looked at Quinlan. He was doing the same thing, concentrating just as hard as I was playing.

I tried to put all those memories into my song. Nothing complicated, nothing fancy. Slow. Simple. With feeling. "Susannah, don't you cry!"

And as the song rang out of the scored drum of my banjo, Suzanne's skin changed from transparent, to the milky, china white that Quinlan remembered so well. And I was crying and singing as her eyes turned to chocolate brown.

"I come from Alabama . . ."

It would all start over again, me and Quinlan and Suzanne. More pain, more love, more grace. But maybe there is Kelly for Quinlan. Maybe there is Seattle for me. For Suzanne, this was not a safe place to come back to, but nowhere *is* safe these days, with heroic miniature golf moguls and renegade banjo players running wild through sacred days and terrifying nights.

For a moment, all I could think was that I was finally getting to see Suzanne without her clothes on, but then Quinlan wrapped a coat around her. Suzanne looked around her, blank and joyful as a newborn babe.

And, with a heart full of love and terror, I finished playing the song. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WILD COWS

by Rachel Pollack

I can imagine
A time of wild cows
They run in packs
They poke and shove each other
They gossip and shout and loaf about
Lazily singing in the empty streets
They stroll beside the supermarket
Exchanging winks and brilliant moos
At night they bellow
And the frogs stay hidden in the suburbs
And the sky retreats a hundred miles
These cows, these wild cows, become furious
They can become furious
No lock closes them out
From the fields of rage
They stomp and charge the stop lights
They smash their thick heads
At plateglass windows
Remembering dimly
How their grandmothers laughed
When they were spindly calves
And believed they could fly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I see these things
While I watch a play
While I sit on the railroad
While I stand outside the fitting room
My arms full of hope
I see the cows dancing
Twirling and dipping in each others' knotted legs
They laugh, a whispery softness
Like herds of mice running over polished floors

The time of the wild cows
Hides in the future
I understand that time
The future
When my father is dead
When my cousin is dead

When the woman who sells the hot dogs is dead
When my friends and I have died
One by one
And only my lover remains
Alive forever as she sits on the curb
Watching the cows assemble
For their Spring march
To the northern parks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robert Reed

ON THE BRINK OF THAT BRIGHT NEW WORLD

art: Alan M. Clark

Robert Reed recently sold "a bizarre first-contact novel" to Tor, and he is at work on two more books. His last story for *Asimov's*, "Burger Love," was published in our November 1992 issue.

I know him. He's this little old guy sitting alone, watching the countryside sliding past, and I keep thinking that I know his face. But how come? Soft white hair and soft hands, his suit meaning money. Not a fortune maybe, but enough. He's riding in first class because he paid.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not like me. He didn't slip in from the cattle cars, I'm thinking. And how the hell do I know him?

The weird thing is, every now and then I can practically hear his voice talking to me. *To me.*

And that's when it hits. I look past him, focusing on his window. It's thick and square and glass, sealed tight because we'll be passing through poisons soon, moving two-hundred-miles-an-hour on magnet juice. And I start thinking how his window looks like an old-fashioned TV screen. Sort of. Which makes me think: Oh, sure. Sure! I remember the little guy. It's got to be him, and think of the odds! He used to be famous. For a little while. A scientist, some kind of astronomer. And a lucky shit for being in the right place, saying all the smart things, with everyone in the world watching him. That's the face, all right. Not a doubt in my mind.

This is a huge chance, a huge risk, and it takes me a couple, three minutes to think things through. To get myself ready. Then I stand and go over to him, sitting beside him, saying, "Aren't you the one? The guy who said, 'We're on the edge of a bright new world'? I can't remember your name—"

"On the brink," he says. Then he says, "Cummings. Dr. Leonard Cummings."

"Oh, Doc Cummings. Sure!" What'd he mean about "brink"? Then I remember. "On the *brink* of a bright new world." That's how he said it, and it seems like a million years ago.

He sort of fidgets, watching me and acting worried.

Which is fine.

I tell him, "My name's Steve," which it isn't. I make him shake my hand, acting like I'm glad to meet a famous guy. Then I tell him something out of left field. Something he'd never expect from a stranger in a train that's going to cross over radioactive lands. "I've got to give you a big thanks," I tell him. "You helped me out once, you and the other astronomers. You did me a whole bunch of favors that night."

That night.

He knows which night I mean. He can't really trust me—who am I?—but nobody turns away a compliment. It's something his mother probably taught him. He sits up straighter, eyes showing some light, and he says, "Well, I'm glad to hear it. A favor? It's good to know—"

"Some crazy night," I interrupt.

"Yes. Yes, it was interesting." The voice is the same one I remember. Smooth and soft. Cummings seems like the sort of guy who's never had to scream in his life. Who wouldn't know how if he had to. "It was quite a spectacular evening," he's saying. "Yes, sir."

"Crazy," I repeat.

"Thrilling," he says.

And I say, "Isn't that the truth?" while laughing hard. Enjoying myself.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Laughing and shaking my head until I worry him, then cutting it off. Boom. I turn dead silent, staring out his window. Then I tell him, "Do you want to hear about it."

Telling, not asking.

Cummings doesn't want to say, "No, I'd rather you didn't." He's not that sort. But he can't seem to tell me, "I want to hear it," either.

"It's a quick story," I promise. "All true."

He gives a little nod.

"Listen," I tell him.

And he does. I make sure he's looking at my eyes, listening because there's no choice. Because he's curious. Because I've got him scared. And while I'm talking the sun comes out from behind fat clouds, yellow light feeling warm and the air around us swimming with bits of dust. They're like tiny, tiny worlds, those bits. Twisting and twisting. Every time I speak, and every time one of us decides to breathe.

I was working in a factory back then. Back when we got to the brink of the new world. It was mostly an ordinary day. At the end of the first shift I called up my wife and said, "Listen. A couple guys from the next shift called in sick. Brown-bottle flu, I guess. And the foreman wants me to stay late tonight. Otherwise he's short bodies, he won't be able to run shit."

My wife said, "Yeah?"

"It's all time-and-a-half," I told her.

She said, "Okay," with her voice flat. Dead. Then she said, "We could use the money, all right."

What a bitch. That's what I was thinking then.

"So what are you doing tonight?" I asked. "Anything special?"

"I don't know," she said. "Talk on the phone, I suppose. Watch some TV or something."

"Just asking," I said.

And she said, "Hey, I know what you're thinking."

"That's good," I warned her. "So you remember it." Then I hung up on her. I slammed down the phone and walked over to the line. I was running the line that night, making the big money. Because we sure did need it. Meaning *she* needed it, the bitch. Always wanting more, just like all of them. Only more so with her. I was so busy thinking of her, talking to her in my head, that I didn't see the foreman come up. "Let's get going," he told me. As if pissed. Then he stood watching me, making sure that I started. The prick.

It was stupid work, running that line. Stupid but easy, and there was time to think. I started remembering how it was when I first married the girl. How I'd thought I was so goddamn lucky. We used to do it every

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

night—I tell this to Cummings—and I wouldn't wash one of my hands afterward, smelling her on it the whole next day.

Everything started perfect. Everything always does, doesn't it?

Then I warn Cummings, "Never marry a beauty. Particularly if she's been spoiled sick since she was a kid." I tell him how a beauty fools you with her ass and her little tricks. A beauty makes you nuts and squeezes your nuts, laughing all the time and you not even knowing it.

Cummings sort of nods, hearing all of this.

The guys at the plant used to tease me, I tell him. The assholes. They'd tell me that I had a fine, fine wife. They'd tell me they were jealous, and how'd it feel to be so lucky? So I'd tell them to fuck themselves. "Shut the fuck up," I'd say, "or we'll go a few rounds. Get me? Understand?"

She and me used to have fights. Pushing and shoving, and what could I do? Humans can't take more than so much. But you hit that sort of woman, and you're in trouble. You know? All you do is teach her that a little pop to the jaw doesn't kill, that she can wash herself clean and go to her mom's and plan new shit before she comes back home again. Then she's got you where she wants you. All over again, and what can you do?

It was like that that night. I couldn't stop thinking about how much she pissed me off.

And all the sudden the big red warning lights were flashing. It was dark outside by then. I saw their reflections in the window beside me. Machines were roaring, so I couldn't hear anything. I shut down the line, figuring that I must have fucked up. That I didn't watch what I was doing. *Her fault for distracting me.* Only when I walked up the line I didn't see anything broken or backed up. All I saw was the foreman and the other guys bunched around someone's ghetto blaster, listening with the sound cranked high. Of all the crazy shit, the news was playing. The news. And I asked what was what.

The foreman went, "Shush," with a finger on his mouth. "Shush."

The asshole.

Some woman was talking, her voice big and booming. Sounding real excited about something. She was saying something about pictures and how they started coming during the day, and they were coming from a long, long distance. Nobody knew from where, she said. A couple times. "Nobody knows their origin."

I asked someone, "What's happening?"

The guy said, "Aliens," and gave this big grin. "From outer space? They're beaming us messages, Steve."

"Aliens?" I said. Not believing it.

"Yeah," he swore. "Martians, or whatever."

How could I believe it? I said, "What do you mean, messages?"

The foreman said, "Photographs," and gave me a look. "The news is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on every station. Astronomers just announced it." He shook his head and pushed the hair out of his eyes, then he was laughing. To himself.

I still didn't get it, and I said so.

So everyone jumped on me.

"ETs?" they said. "Little green men? From other fucking worlds?"

"They're sending us pictures?" I said.

"Like postcards," said one guy. "Like pretty postcards from Yellowstone, only they're from a lot farther away."

Everyone had a good laugh, then they went back to listening. And I was thinking: Screw you! Some new reporter was talking about alien landscapes, pretty but weird, and no, the scientists didn't know this world. It was circling a different sun, only there weren't any right-colored stars in the right place. The signals were coming from the middle of nothing, maybe light-years away. Then the reporter was talking about the new photos. Scientists were handing out big colored ones. Just as soon as they got them decoded.

It was some wild night, I was thinking.

First I'm doing a double shift, and then it's aliens. Slime monsters from space, and they're talking to us with pictures. As if we're kids too young and stupid to understand words.

The foreman was smiling, shaking his head and happy as a pig in shit. It took him forever to send us back to work. I could tell he'd rather be home, sitting in front of the TV. This was big stuff for him. But finally he sent me up front to start things, and we worked straight to the supper break. No interruptions. Then we stopped for our usual long half-hour. I bought pop and some candy bars, and I watched the foreman sitting by the radio, eyes big and round, someone describing some kind of foamy lake with critters swimming on top. Big fins and white spouts, and the voice was saying how this was history in the making, and lovely, our first look at another world and that sort of noise.

The foreman couldn't take it anymore. He turned and swallowed, making a show of things. Getting up his courage. "I'm feeling sick," he told us. Then he halfway coughed. "I must have gotten that flu bug." He looked straight at us, saying, "You can't run without everyone, so I guess we're done. All right?"

Everyone nodded, glad to hear it.

"Clean up," he told us, "and get out of here. I'm going home and throw up." And then he halfway grabbed his stomach, trying to fool somebody. As if anyone gave a good hard shit.

Leaving was great, I tell Cummings. The way I figured it, I was tired enough and rich enough for one night. Besides, nobody was going to chew

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my ass come morning. I wasn't the one who'd have to explain orders left undone; so what did I care?

Outside it was cool and dark. And clear. I remember the drive home in my pickup, the radio off, the roads almost empty. It felt like late, late Sunday night. No bars open. Everyone indoors. Everyone in the world was watching TV, except me. And my wife. She was home because her car was in the driveway, but when I pulled in behind her I heard the stereo playing. Screaming. The stereo I'd bought her with my time-and-a-half, and she was trying to blow the speakers or some such shit.

Lights were blazing away in the living room. I came in and shut the door, halfway looking around. She was down the basement or in the back or somewhere. Not watching the big news, that's for sure. I pulled off my boots and hit the remote, thinking: Would it be something if she didn't know? I could spring the news on her, painting it up real good. Aliens? She'd call me nuts. A liar, and worse. She'd wonder if I got kicked out of work for fighting. Was that it? And me watching her face when she saw it was true. All true. I'd know something she didn't, and screw you, lady. Screw you!

They were showing one of the alien pictures just then. On TV. A bunch of buildings on a wooded hillside, the sky full of sunset colors and thin clouds and some kind of faraway airplane or spaceship gleaming up high. Then the buildings got larger. Closer. I couldn't hear shit for the music, but I could see fine. I still remember all of it. The buildings had steep roofs and star-shaped windows. Five-pointed stars. And there was a fat old tree in the middle of them. The tree trunk looked like a mess of heavy-duty ropes twisted around each other, and there weren't any leaves on the branches. Just wads of blue-green sponge-like crap. Except even knowing it was a different world didn't help. Aliens? I kept thinking of China or somewhere. Maybe someplace somebody had invented, the whole thing someone's fancy big-time joke.

Then the stereo quit. It was between songs, the house all quiet, and I could hear people. They were talking on TV, then somewhere else too. More than one. Just for a second, I could hear them.

I sort of froze.

I could hear talking, movements, and I got a weird feeling that made me hold my breath and do nothing. I froze up inside, waiting, and finally I made myself start thinking again. I tried to decide what to do.

When the next song was hammering, I slipped into the hallway and next to the big bedroom. The door was mostly open. I could see the mirror over her chest of drawers. My wife's back was in the mirror, long and brown except where her tiny swimsuit needed straps. Her back was moving up and down, up and down. Then I saw a big hand and a hairy forearm sliding up her back, and the hand pulled around to the front.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Enjoying a tit, I suppose. But then again, she had beauties. And when that happened someone made a noise. Her. Him. Maybe me. Which was when I backed into the living room again, my heart trying to fill up my chest with blood and its pounding.

I wasn't thinking anymore.

Maybe I wasn't even surprised. I don't know. All I remember is wanting to be outside, putting distance between her and me. I pulled on my boots before the song finished, getting out without being heard. Then I remembered the TV being on, and what if they noticed? Fuck them, I thought. So what? I got as far as halfway climbing into my pickup, and that's when I got an idea. I stopped where I was. Looking up at the stars, I was breathing hard, feeling the sweat soaking my clothes. Then I started walking, not fast, going around back and through the gate and the patio door, into the little bedroom where I kept my hunting gear. Where I had some pistols.

One gun was this little thing I used on squirrels, on targets. A .22, that's all. I wanted to scare them. I'd wave it at them and make them crazy. Maybe I'd put a shot over their heads, I was thinking. But that was it. Whatever it took to be heard.

I walked down the hallway feeling nothing. Just nothing. It was like floating, all dreamy, not really touching the floor and my legs moving out of habit. Going easy and slow. And I came through the doorway with the lovers still banging. Right with the music, I tell Cummings. And me floating above the floor, just watching. I was there maybe a week before my wife noticed, looking back over her shoulder and halfway surprised, halfway smiling. Her pretty face was sweaty, and what she did was the biggest mistake possible. Smiling with her pretty mouth. Opening that pretty mouth. Saying with it, "Home early, huh dear? Or'd they fire your stupid ass?"

I stop talking, and Cummings keeps very quiet.

He's scared and maybe a little confused. We've gotten out of what he knows, all right. This isn't stars and gravity, and none of this comes to him naturally.

I don't tell him what happened.

All I say is, "Afterward," and then wait. Then I start again, telling him, "I went back in the living room afterward and turned off the stereo, and I sat down and watched TV. Sort of. That's probably where I saw you first. I remember you, I'm pretty sure, sitting with a couple other science types, plus this old broad, everyone talking about the pictures. Fighting about what they meant and why. I can't remember what you said, but you understand. I was feeling kind of wrung out." I give him a little smile. "Go figure."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cummings halfway nods, then says, "I happened to be near the studio. They wanted an astronomer with exobiology interests, and they caught me at my hotel. I was visiting town. Pure chance."

"Oh, sure," I say.

"Anyone could have been called. It was my luck, that's all."

"Hey, don't apologize to me!"

"But we weren't fighting," he says. It's a big deal to him. "I remember that round table discussion. We weren't fighting. It was a creative debate—"

"Hey," I warn him, "who's telling what?"

And he shuts up. I've got him more scared than anything, and it's fun. A lot more fun than I'd ever guessed it would be.

I tell him about the mountain pictures, a string of them being shown while I sat there. They were my favorites, I claim. Big green mountains, real rough, looking like great deer country. The sort of place you could hide in for years. One scientist talked about that world having more gravity than Earth, him judging by the mountain shapes and the thick trees. Then the woman said it was warmer, judging by the sun angles and whatnot.

Clues were everywhere. That's what the four of them kept saying, over and over again. The pictures were full of clues about the aliens and their world, and it was just a matter of finding them and knowing what they were.

"It was like you were warning me," I tell him.

He looks at me.

"Thanks."

He stays quiet, eyes dropping now.

I had a couple big-ass clues in my bedroom, dead and bleeding, and I started telling myself to get up and do something. To start hiding the clues before someone began missing someone.

And all the time there were new pictures. Rivers and beaches and strange birds and bugs up close. Then came the first pictures of the aliens themselves—

"I'll never forget that moment," Cummings mutters.

—with their four legs each, like big dogs, and each of them raising four arms at the cameras. All very weird. The hands seemed awfully human. And their faces were halfway normal too. They looked like sick people with sky-blue hair and funny yellow eyes. Lab dog eyes. Friendly and happy, and always watching you. That's how they've always seemed to me.

My stomach started hurting, but finally I made myself stand and get to work. I found some old tarps in the basement, plus clothesline ropes with wire cores. Then I went around the house pulling drapes closed and

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

collecting shit. "Clues are everywhere," I kept telling myself. I got the bodies and the bloody bedding, sure. Plus cigarettes and any strange clothes. Everything went inside the tarps. I didn't know loverboy, but I went through his wallet a couple times. He lived on the other side of town. There wasn't any strange car parked nearby, so I figured my wife must have brought him. Or he'd walked partway. I decided what I needed was to make it look as if she'd run away. That's why I loaded up a suitcase with her clothes, plus her best purse and most of her jewelry. Stuff she'd always taken when she ran off to her mom's. Then I threw in my pistol and wrapped the tarps up like Christmas presents. Four tarps altogether. Everything tied and tied again and then tied a third time too.

The loading was a bitch. I pulled my pickup into the back yard, every light off, then tried not to make noise. Which was tough. I nearly shit my pants when I carried loverboy. I knew where I'd take them—I had this perfect place all planned—and after them I loaded up a bunch of concrete blocks. *She* had wanted me to build a grill with those blocks. Which is funny. Then I shut the back end—*wham*—and drove back around her little car, out onto the street and down the block before turning my headlights back on.

Being careful didn't matter.

Nobody was out. Nobody noticed. The world was too busy, leaving me alone, and it was pretty much perfect. I couldn't have asked for a better night. Not ever.

There were some gravel pits near the river. I knew one pit was just abandoned, and I tell Cummings about my plan. I'm hoping that he's impressed with what I did. Those fresh pits slough off their sandy sides, getting shallower and wider and burying their floors. I drove up next to the one and dropped the tarps in one at a time. The bedding and other shit. Then loverboy. Then my wife last. I stood there on the brink of a deep hole, watching the sand fall in after her. Listening to it move, that dry living sound that sand makes. Thinking how this was the easiest thing she'd ever done for me, dropping fast into the cold dead water. No fuss at all. And afterward I drove home, going nice and easy. Just out for a drive, I'd tell any cops. And wasn't it some day? Some day! If they stopped me I'd ask if they had heard about the aliens calling to us, and wasn't that something? Pretty neat, I'd tell them. Pretty goddamn neat!

"This is real," says Cummings. Softly. Almost without talking out loud. "You're confessing it to me, aren't you?"

"I guess so," I say. "Only you don't know me. You don't know where this happened. I get off this train, and there's no way you can find me again. What can you do? Wrestle me down? You?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He sits still, looking smaller and older. He has a hurt face, sad for a lot of reasons. Sad to be here now. Sad to know what he knows. Sad for my dead wife, I suppose, and her boyfriend too. And probably a bigger sadness. He starts looking out the thick window, the country getting wilder, full of weeds nobody cuts and empty houses falling down on themselves. Poisoned country and the ninth year of Depression. There's a new war starting in the Far East, and the old one in Russia is heating up again. Cummings seems ready to die from all his sadness, but he doesn't. Instead he looks back at me, asking, "Don't you ever regret doing what you did?"

"Regret what? Being patient with the bitch? Waiting that long to take care of business?" I laugh out loud, telling him, "I had a few bad dreams, but those were years ago. No, I'm fine. I'm happy. Almost perfect, if you want to know."

He almost looks at my eyes, asking, "What did the police do?"

"To me?"

"I'm assuming they didn't convict you."

"They didn't even try." I laugh again. "Sure they suspected me. Her mom suspected me. Anyone could put together the basics for themselves. But they couldn't find evidence. Not one good clue. You see, it was days before the police started checking. By then I'd cleaned the bedroom fifty times. By then—maybe you remember this—a whole lot of people were missing, what with the craziness. Pure craziness. It was like a big party everywhere after those pictures came. There were all kinds of runaways and divorces, everyone sure that the aliens were about to land and make everything right. Just by snapping their fingers."

"But they weren't coming," he tells me. He talks louder, saying, "The aliens made it clear they weren't—"

"I know, I know."

"They were transmitting from light-years away. Their only message was fixed to the last photograph. Their only words. 'We wish you good fortune. We wish you peace—' "

"I know how it goes."

"In fifty-two languages," he tells me. "They must have eavesdropped on our television broadcasts, learning about us. They were very forthright in telling us that they weren't going to intrude on our lives. 'We do not wish to distort the precious patterns of your societies.' They sent photographs and that one brief message, and people were foolish to expect spaceships. They wouldn't listen to us . . . !"

I say, "Sure."

"The aliens knew better than to come and change things."

And I say, "Except they did. Distort things, I mean."

"Not intentionally," he says real soft. But with anger, too. It's as if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he's defending the yellow-eyed critters, telling me, "The craziness, as you termed it, was short-lived."

"Oh, sure."

"Nothing major was altered," he says.

"Unless you ask my wife," I tell him.

He looks at me, then at his knees. Angrier now.

"Anyway," I say, "that's what happened. A few days later the police came and asked about my wife. Her mom was worried about her. I told them we had a fight and I left, and when I got back she was gone. I didn't know where to. 'Not her mom's house, huh? Well, that's odd. You don't suppose something bad has happened to her?' "

He's listening but pretending not to hear. He's taking everything to heart, even better than I'd hoped. I know it because he starts dropping tears now. Runny little tears on the white old face.

"They came back eventually and searched my house. My truck. Talked to my neighbors, but what could they know? My little pistol couldn't be heard over the stereo, and anyone awake had been watching TV that night. There wasn't time to snoop on neighbors, and thank you." I'm talking to Cummings now. "I mean it. Thanks for distracting everybody. Thanks for all your help!"

The man bends lower, almost crumbling.

"They never found the bodies. There were ties between my wife and loverboy, but he'd vanished too. And what could they prove? No clues for them, just guesses."

Cummings makes a low sound, then nothing.

"So I just wanted to come over and say, 'Hi!' You gave me my big chance. You and the other scientists got me home early in the first place. If it wasn't for you, I'd have finished my shift and gone home and slept in that bed without guessing any of it."

He shuts his eyes and holds them shut.

"I saw you," I say. "When you said the famous words? It was morning. I was getting ready to go back to work, trying to keep everything normal. And you told the cameras, 'We're on the brink of a bright new world.' "

He gives a little nod.

"All because some aliens were sending us postcards from space." I wait a second, then I say, "You know what postcards are, don't you? They're things you send when you don't want to spend much time. You write a couple nice words on them, and people think good things about you."

He looks at me, his eyes big and strange.

"Anyway," I say, "thanks again for everything. I mean it."

And he tells me, "You're welcome," and takes a huge breath, holding tight to it. Not wanting to let it go, not for anything. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE TIME TOUR STOPS AT MY HOUSE AFTER LUNCH

I don't much mind time travelers dropping in,
even unannounced; it means I'm still a tourist spot;
some words I wrote are being read still centuries ahead;
though long since dead, I shape some small,
if not significant, nuances of future thought.

I don't much mind time travelers dropping in,
though some think I am Ellison and some think Poe.
They do not make much noise and leave no mess;
I'd hardly know that they were here at all,
except the way the second hand takes one tick back
when they arrive and jumps one tick ahead as they depart,
and the fact I see them, ghost sheer, standing all around
in reverend, if appalled, surprise
I am not more imposing than I am.

I don't much mind time travelers dropping in;
I like to see the changes time has made
in styles of thought and clothing, and the way
each generation sees me,
some as monster, some as master, some as man.

And, of course, as all Art is just Ego in disguise,
I prize the child clones of me that a fad
makes popular near one century's end,
as I am glad to know I am remembered still;
though often out of fashion,
never all the rage,
I am more popular than I was in life.
At my age, any immortality's good enough.

Still, one thing worries me,
—none come, not one, from
more than half a dozen centuries ahead—
I worry all the race is dead,
or, my vanity being what it is,
worse *yet*, none are, but I am unread.

—William John Watkins

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

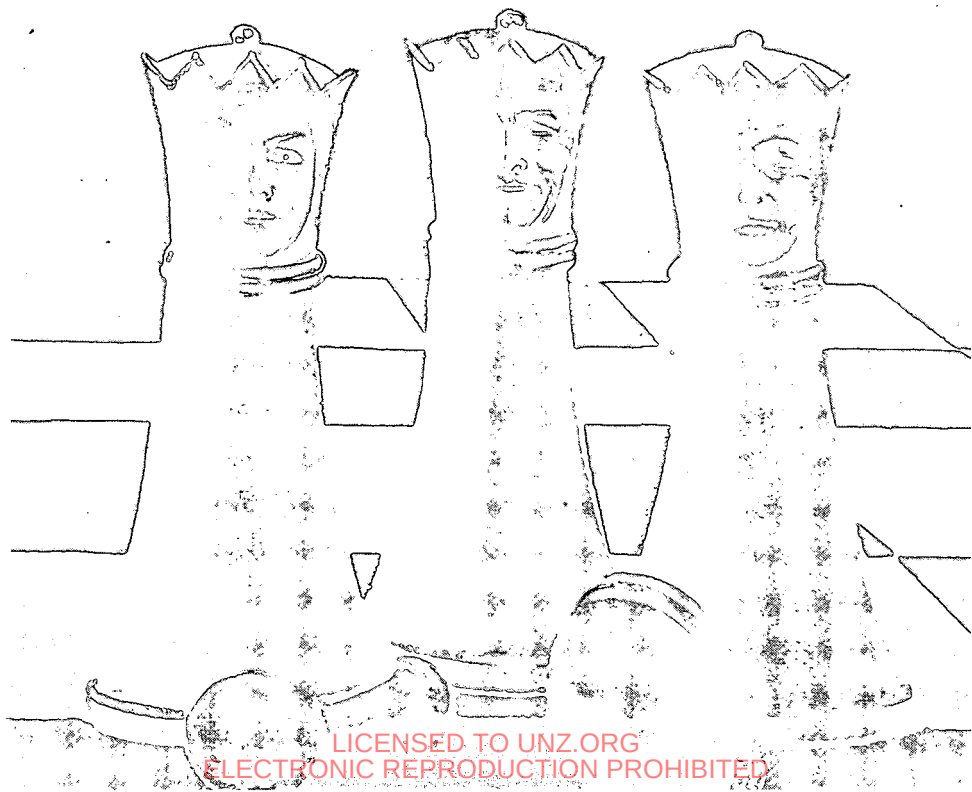
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THREE QUEENS

Esther M. Friesner

The author has two funny high-fantasy novels coming out this year. *Majik by Accident*, the first book in her new trilogy, will be released by Ace in September. *Split Heirs*, which was co-written with Lawrence Watt-Evans, will be out from Tor soon. Her new fantasy for us, though, lifts a veil from the past to take a dark and moving look at the events that begot a powerful legend.

art: Carol Heyer



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Long after Guinhwyfar has gone, I gaze at the old man in the chair. The damp wind off the marshes blows in through the unglazed windows, lifting his elflocked white hair until some strand or other is whipped across dripping nose or rheum-encrusted eyes, and there it sticks. It always happens so. He never even tries to brush the pale, limp threads away. I do not move. To move would be to break the slender spell that is all that keeps me from lurching to my feet, grabbing him by the scrawny, wattled neck, shaking him until his toothless gums clapper together and demanding, "*What have you done with my father?*"

So slim a spell, at once impossibly strong and frail as adamantine spiderweb. Yet for all that, I know its power would be useless, kept or broken. No cave so deep nor elfland so faraway could hold the man *this* excuse for breath has stolen from me. From us all.

My father was a hero. Many times in my travels I saw how the mere mention of his name would cleave the chatter from a gathering of common men. The sound of it alone would fall upon them like Rome's old might, Byzantium's awesome splendor. I saw how it filled their meager souls with fire, made their heavy lips twist into smiles that lingered over wondrous dreams.

His name, and for a time they shook the dung from their cracked leather shoes, put aside the wooden plow, and rode with him in search of holy glory. I saw raw hands that had never so much as touched a dagger curl themselves around the gemmed hilts of invisible swords while the phantom bodies of the proud black knights their fancies slew stacked themselves three deep around the smoky daub walls of the drinking house. My father's name hung in the air, a glamour more golden than any homely casting of my dam's, and lent these earthworms wings. Had Guinhwyfar been there as witness, she'd cross herself and move bloodless lips around her tame catchword: *miracle.*

Yes, hero and miracle both, my father and his name. But now . . .

I pace the small, cheerless chamber. It lies in the southernmost quarter of my keep, far from the prying eyes of those servingfolk I may not entirely trust. The slaves I permit to come and go at their pleasure. They know, by the warning bite of their iron collars, that a word spoken incautiously will buy them a fiercer bite of iron at the neck. I do not like to play the cruel man's part, but he has given me no choice. I glower at my captive, my captor, and demand, "What have you done with him?" awaiting some reply.

There is none. There can be none. And who am I to expect a miracle? No, I set my sights lower. I would be satisfied to have some contrary spark of hellfire itself light those empty eyes with their old, keen flame. I would dice with the Christians' own devil for the hope of having this clatter of old bones rise once more and say to me, "Still the fool, boy?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What an hour I wasted in your begetting! Not even the memory of pleasure can make up for having fathered a weak-spined thing like you, Modred."

Why do I continue to shelter him from the world, and the world from what he has become? Surely not for love. I wonder if perhaps I ought to summon my men to me, to escort me from this place. The cold marsh wind is not good for my aching bones. *He* bears it well, of course. Cold is nothing to him, who rode so late, so long, over so many lives to hammer out a realm. And now the owlish, elfin voice behind my ear creeps in like the soft soughing of the wind to ask, *And for what?*

That is not for me to say.

I will not summon my men just yet. Instead I will drink a leisurely memory of my—of our—late visitor.

Guinhwyfar was charming, of course. To that sole end these petty kings breed their daughters, to win in bed what they may not in battle. She came for Christian charity, she said, and stayed long enough to spoon a pan of gruel into the gaping red hole of his mouth. More than the half of it dribbled down into his lap where she left it for lesser souls to wipe away.

She said, "His lips look a little blue, Modred. Is that all right?" and hurried back to the warmth and serenity of her convent walls without listening to my reply.

She will not much like what I plan to do this day, I think, but what in her god's name will the white woman ever be able to do about it? Milk-skinned, milk-souled, she is too sickly-sweet to raise any quarrel she cannot win by pouting or wheedling or running off to hide. Yet she shall play her part.

One comes. "My lord?" My men-at-arms flank him with cold steel against the unlikely event of his attempted departure without leave. I weigh him by eye: Not much meat, birdie bones, dirt, the smell of stale beer. So this is a poet.

"Leave him," I command. "Let the slaves bring us food and wine. The Falernian." My men have heard me—their eyes, at least, still kindle when another human being speaks to them. But I am more and less than human, if what the poets sing of my dark mother can ring true. Black Morgan's get from her own brother's loins, I must have stolen some of that cunningwoman's skill for sifting souls. How else explain that even now my men-at-arms carry a Modred-imp inside their skulls? And the imp scampers among their thoughts to spy the fear each feels whenever he looks upon my father's face. The fear clothes itself in words that shiver like beggars in the rain: *And in this, too, the end that waits for me?*

I think these men-at-arms who aid me now, in this hidden chamber, in this desolate place, will become my boldest steel. This instant I could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

command them to go forth and conquer me the world, and they would do it. One last look on my father's face and they would gallop to their deaths without demur. So Arthur still retains a scrap of power to work miracles even now. He casts a new spell that, singing, weaves its strength around strong men: *Better to throw your life against the lances of your enemy than purchase safety, cradle your bones, go home to dandle babes that grow and fly away to leave you lone, awaiting the erosions of time and the death that cruelly will not come.*

Only I am immune to his witcheries. Keen death, quick death, death with a whetted edge—such won't be mine. My father said it best himself, long since: "Can such a coward be my son?"

But I am brave. Just coming here each day takes bravery. Where is Lancelot, who once was held up before my eyes as goading whip and bright *exemplum* every chance my father got? Lancelot, the grail of gallantry! He too has fled. He huddles among monks and whimpers psalms piteously at the gates of heaven like a starving dog scratching for admittance at a kitchen door. Against the iron face of age, Lancelot is the coward, not I.

"My—my lord?" It is the poet, piping like a cricket from his perch on that blackwood stool beneath the window. My men-at-arms have left us two alone, as ordered.

I am being a sorry host. My guest has taken the only other seat in this room, apart from the siege where my father sits. I lean upon my staff and turn to him. "What is your name?"

His mouth opens and closes many times. My imp leaps in at his ear and reads that he is balancing the wisdom of truth against several clever lies. Whichever choice will lengthen his days, allow him to escape my keep alive, that will be the one he'll make. Not what is right, but what will serve him best to save his skin. Oh, good. I like this man better by the moment.

"Never mind," I say. "I need a man who can keep a secret."

The poet shifts uneasily in his place. My father's head nods, slumps down. Long gurgling snores fill the stone chamber. The poet's eyes shift left and right. To gaze upon my father's face once filled men with dread, yet lifted up their hearts. Now there is only the dread, and that is chiller than the marsh winds. Monks claim they love to meditate upon the body's frailty, the better to adore the imperishable soul, yet I have yet to hear of one monastery where they take special pains to gather in and contemplate the old.

A slave comes with food and wine. I serve my guest myself, although my ache-gnarled legs make such service difficult. When I look at him, will his eyes presume to hold a measure of pity? They had better not. Not for me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There are three slabs of bread to hold our cold meat and cheese, three cups also. Some fool kitchen knave will need a talking-to, I see. It's not as if we are three full men here. My father has lacked the means—teeth and inclination both—to deal with food like this since Mother's elfin henchmen brought him to my keep all those months past. Still, for old times' sake, when he stirs I kneel beside him and tilt his cup against his lips. I smile to see the silver-stubbled cords of his neck move greedily as he gulps the wine.

"Falernian," I tell the poet. "Imported from the southron lands, when the sea-wolves permit the ships to cross unhindered. It was his favorite—*is*. There are times I find it hard not to speak of him as dead. A shame there is not more of this fine vintage in store—I was lucky to get this much. Sometimes I like to think it only wants enough of a draught of the wine he loved—loves—to bring him back to the land of the living."

The poet sips his own wine charily. To his eyes, I babble, and so am an even greater danger than rumor tints me. What have I in store for him? No one of my people has let slip a word, for I have given them no words to let slip. Being who I am, I must be up to no good. He is a poet: he believes the tales, even to those he weaves on his own account. He should know better, but logic sleeps apart from poetry. His imagination flutters wildly from one baseless surmise to another. Now I see it fold its wings and drop to roost upon the matter of this wine.

How prudently he savors every mouthful of the liquid silk! Perhaps he dreams my black sorcery knows limits, that my poisons are trifles that a man's tongue can detect, so long as he tastes each mouthful cautiously enough. Foolish notion: My venoms surpass even my mother's finest brews, and are tasteless, odorless, cureless every one.

Yet even in my most desperate need to do a man to death, I would not stoop to taint the Falernian. I am still civilized. I feed my father the rest of the good wine. My poor bones creak and pop when I may finally stand.

The poet sees me in a new light, now, and he is curious. Dark Modred, black Morgan's son, little twisty toad-back who crept from the blazing sun of his father's splendid court to follow after mysteries, that is the mask he holds up to cover my face. (Merlin, my master, also delighted in books, but apart from the slander of his begetting—nun's child, devil's seed—he is reputed wise, kind, a maker of marvels. The old pimp.) Why should a creature like me take such pains over this dribble-and-dirt befouled shell of an old man? Let him wonder.

"What—what happened to him, my lord?" the poet asks. It is as direct as he dares come at the matter.

This is all to the good, his asking. If he had not, I would have had to twitch the conversation this way and that until I brought him 'round to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pose that very question. I dislike such games; I relish being spared them. I must ask Mother whether my stars are especially fortunate today.

But Mother will keep. I have a poet with whom to deal. "Do you not know who this man is?" I counter-ask. He shakes his head, a fearful emptiness in his eyes. He cannot tell whether he will be punished for not knowing. I have a certain reputation in these lands—no worse than most, but considering whose womb bore me, certain small demerits of morality tend to become exaggerated as my doings pass from lip to lip.

I tell him the true name of who it is sits with clouded eye between us. The marsh wind whirls the too-sweet reek of old man's urine through the room beneath the breath of my terse, plain revelation. The poet's fear blossoms as I speak, a rose of ice. He shakes his head like a hoof-stunned hound. Oh, poet! Poor heart-struck poet, do you dream that if you shake the words away into the night, the fact will follow? No, I speak the truth. Modred is a weak-boned imp, half fey in the blood, called coward because I did not cherish steel over study, but I am no liar. Not yet.

I reach into the soft blue lambskin pouch at my belt and let my dark fingers unwrap from around the mystery I now would show him. An arrowhead so small, so black, so primitively shaped you could not imagine it being able to serve a weapon's purpose unless the full force of otherworldly magic lash it to the fletched shaft and guide it to the mark. I have found many of these toys in my rambles. So have other men. We differ only in what we make of such finds. I am wise enough to know that I cannot guess to what end this tiny chip of flint was made.

But "Elfshot!" gasps the poet. He is of the other sort of man, I see. He looks from the flint to my father, then to me. As I said, he knows the tales. The hidden folk whose land we stole, the malice that is as vital to elfin hearts as blood to human, the wicked weaponry with which they stalk us on the sly, all this is as familiar ground to him as his mother's hearthside.

The healthy ploughman whose arm suddenly falls useless has been stricken by the villainous archery of the Fey. The deep-chested warrior who wakes one morn to find his legs won't bear him is their victim too. The tender lady whose laughter once made all men glad, yet who now lies abed, a muttering crone before her time, has likewise been elfshot to the heart. There is no other explanation. The truth is, no explanation at all exists, but we flee the ignorant dark more eagerly than we flee the foolish lie.

Elfshot. I nod and sigh, giving my consent to the first falsehood. "He has been so since his vanishment. We found him wandering near the Saxon lands. It was fortunate that they did not find him first."

The poet's grief destroys his face. "Mount Badon," he says, "now this."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My father's most famous victory over the barbarous tribes has become a staple of every poet's offerings. The best changes rung upon that theme are those which seduce the listeners into believing that they themselves stood shield-by-shield with Arthur at Badon and slew their boar-helmed hundreds.

"I can't believe it." The poet is cast adrift on hostile waters. I have done worse than cheat him of a hero; I have cut down a dream. "I thought our king was loved by the folk of Faerie." He might say more—might casually mention the tales they tell of my mother's fey blood, now mine—but he would not be so discourteous. All things of Faerie by custom shun the touch of iron, and within these walls all the iron blades answer to me.

"Well, they are the Seeliefolk who love him," I explain. "But, then, the Unseelie are another elfin nation altogether, capricious, malign, and not to be trusted."

"Oh yes, oh yes," he says, as if he'd suckled nonsense of that stripe from his mother's breast.

"You can see why I keep him here," I say. "If his old foes discovered this—"

"But the realm is secure." The poet looks uncertain. "Isn't it? Lord Bedwyr reigns—"

"Bless his reign with many days," I say, and no man who knows me can doubt my sincerity. I never craved kingship. This, too, my father held to my account of failings. "But our lord holds only the borderlands. The rest of the realm is broken up under the care of many of Arthur's best knights. Good men, all, but in your wanderings have you ever heard it said that they would rally without question to Bedwyr's aid, if the Saxons pressed?"

The poet makes many annoying small disclaimers as to the reliability of his sources, coupled with the modest assertion that he is too lowly placed a person to learn much of how the great conduct their affairs—the better to escape any blame should the information he gives me prove false. In the end he confirms what my spies have already told me: Each lordling for himself; Bedwyr stands alone.

"My father gave his life to the making of the realm," I say. *His life and others*, I think. *With their consent or without it. My life, too, if I had let him, or been worth the trouble to bully into his dream.* But done is done. Any man who asks the dead if they were content to perish as they did gets no answer to his folly. "If we do not now find a way to destroy all chance of this—" I wave at the figure in the chair "—becoming known, a day will come when the tribes learn the truth."

The poet still shakes his head and puts the knuckles of one finger to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his mouth, like a little boy. "What difference will it make, my lord? He does the land no good the way he is, but still he does it no harm either."

I whirl to lash the thickwit savagely across his wagging jaws. The effort winds me and brands pain along the back of my hand. I doubt the poet will feel the throb of my blow for long, but that means nothing. Our finest acts lie in the ghosts of power they summon up, not in themselves. My father would understand.

"Silence!" I bark. "Prove your ignorance to me again and I'll have my men deal with you. I don't need the services of a fool."

The poet cringes and swears that it shall be as my lordship wishes.

Now I might explain my purpose to him, but to what good? He fears me too much for me to gauge whether he truly comprehends what I need to do or if he is only saying so to shield himself from a black wizard gone mad. That is too bad. I had wished for someone to share more of this with me than merely the execution.

"Come," I command. I hobble from the chamber. The poet follows, no fine-bred questing-hound but a tame hedgehog chumbling in my wake. My men-at-arms stand just outside the door. I signal that they are to escort us. This means the brawnier one is to carry me. I am scooped up in his arms as if I were a babe. His grip on my shoulder is strong, and I see the glimmer of the old, gold ring with which I bought this man's devotion.

We pass through the keep and out into the open air. The second man-at-arms has run ahead. I gave the orders for this day weeks ago. All should have come to pass by now, save for the fact that my men could not find me the proper poet. The dying of the year reaps the roads of gay summer folk—the singers, the tumblers, the pipers and the rest. I think they go to ground with the bear-keeper and his beast, drowsing through the winter on the memory of music.

I glance over my man's shoulder at the poet we have found at last. He is very wan and the fear of death still shimmers in the whites of his eyes like the reflection of a scythe-blade on water.

The horses are waiting. Once mounted, I am as good as any man. My most trusted people gather to my stirrup. They are only nine—I could risk no more—and they must suffice. Guinhwyfar prattled how her white god reached the ears of a world with just twelve men to bear his tidings. My nine will do: I have only a realm to reach.

The poet mounts his steed with difficulty. He is unused to it and will be sore before this task is done. But after, when his true labor begins, I think he will spend time enough in the saddle to grow accustomed to the pain.

I tell my people, "You know your purposes. Be blessed in their accomplishment." The saddle beneath me creaks as I turn and show them the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poet. "Remember him," I say. "You will hear more of him in time." They nod. They know that if they do not hear what I have promised, or hear it all recounted hobblewise and clumsy, their duty is to hunt him down or face the wrath of my avenging spirit.

They believe in ghosts! Silly folk, but mine, and useful. And who am I to laugh at those who fear what cannot be seen or touched? I am worse than they. They stand in terror of the unseen; I have come to worship it.

The poet and I ride from the keep. One of my men rides with us the three-days' journey to my mother's house. I need him to guard the poet and to attend my wants on the road.

When the poet learns where we are going, there is no holding him from his verses: *Black Morgan has left the halls of stone where once she ruled the mountains! Black Morgan has stepped down from her aerie with silver wings sweeping back the midnight of her hair!* Here is a man bound for disappointment.

Mother's house takes up the least ruinous wing of an old Roman villa. She dwells there happily, rooting in the tousled garden like a mole, speaking to the dozen cats who prowl her beds of herbs and wail like strayed changelings at the moon. Mother is fond of cats and herbs and seeing things through to a proper ending. When she was tired of queenship, she left it with a calm, sensible grace, and told her successor that if any were sent to follow after her and bother her with trifling ravel-end matters of government, she would loose the full power of the Fey upon them. She has been undisturbed in the old villa ever since.

It is her love for ending things with grace that bought me her cooperation in this. My messenger raced ahead of our small party to bring her the good news about the poet. She is mounted and waiting for us at the place where the lichened corpse of a toppled garden god marks the western edge of her demesne. Deeply hooded, her face is invisible, but I can see jewels brightening the brown hands she extends for the poet's homage. A basket rides pillion behind her. Does it mew? Oh, Mother!

Two more days' ride and we will be there. I feel the shell around my shoulders start to crack. Mother keeps her counsel and her place by the nightly fire my man builds up for her use alone. To his credit, the poet does not seek to intrude upon black Morgan's midnight privacies. He eats his food and drinks his wine and does his business against the trees in peace, under the vigilant eyes of my human falcon.

And now we lie down for our rest this last night of all. So near the lake, I marvel that I cannot hear the water lapping against the shore. I lie on two thicknesses of sheepskin, but still the cold seeps through the fleeces, knotting my limbs. The stars scrape silver scars across the sky. I watch them wheel their way to dawn and pity myself a little that I shall see them no more.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Modred? I wake to cat's eyes burning green. My mother's voice comes from the brown striped puss that sits so primly near my head. The cat does not speak—it is simply her vessel—and no one can hear its words but the one of her choosing. *Son, are you sure?*

I close my eyes and fill Mother's cat with all the thought I have given to tomorrow. If I could spare her the pain, I would, but the pain is a part of what I have decided, what I have become. There have been days when I imagined I was gone and all that was left was a Modred-shape molded of pain. Not all my art will let me figure myself as a being apart from the fire eating me by inches, alive. Let her know—not because I want to burden her with my agony, but so that she will understand why it was easy for me to choose the path of sacrifice.

Yes, she will understand, my mother. She must, already understanding so much. I have gazed into her eyes and seen the secrets of the dreaming seed, the mysteries of the dying and undying year. Her pastes and potions are only the simplest trappings of the true powers she draws out of the earth. The peasants can never grasp her as what she is, but they nod, very sage and knowing, when we name her sorceress and fey. Before we part, I pray she will find the means and time to reassure me that my pain, too, has its place in the cycle.

The cat goes to carry my message back to Mother. I suppose she had to ask if I were sure. This is no common way I've chosen to make my offering. Least of all she understands why I've chosen to involve my father in this manner. For her to fathom that, she must be reborn someone's son.

Soon I hear her rise from her separate fire and come to ours. My good guard feigns sleep prettily. I soon have cause to be grateful for his skill. When Mother rouses the poet and he cries out loudly enough to shake ripe chestnuts from the trees, the guard just grumbles and rolls over, much to the poet's amazement. Mother has the wit to spin him a story of spells that hold men senseless at her pleasure and all is well.

Her cape rustles over the dead leaves as she draws the poet away. She is telling him of how lonely she has been, cut off from human society by a cruel son's mandate, little better than a thrall within the boundaries I have set for her. The cold air gusts from the folds of her cloak as she settles down beside her fire. I hear the poet crunching leaves under his skinny rump as he joins her.

There will be wine. This time it will not be the Falernian. In moments, his head will grow heavy but he will not sleep. That would not suit our purpose at all. He will blink his eyes and swear he is alert, merely bedazzled by black Morgan's legendary beauty. She is all charm, my royal dam—not false appeal like Guinhwyfar's superficial wiles, but the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

true art which envious minds call witchery. By the time she asks him to sing her the song of Camlann, the potion has him fast.

"Lady, what song is this?" he whispers. Does he wonder why his lips are half-numb?

"The song of my greatest sorrow," Mother says. "The song of the last great battle." I do not dare to turn my body enough so that I can see them where they sit by her fire. Still, my mind paints her mimicking the pose of that nameless Roman matron whose features grace her sleeping-chamber wall: neck bent, but never to a yoke, head bowed to Fate, but never in surrender.

And then the words, the story that has been my secret portion in all this, the tale I've spun from strands of heart's blood ever since the day they brought that husk, my father, home. I feel a flutter in my chest, a startlement to know that the story over which I lavished so many hours of care could be told in so little time.

I expect by now the poet's brow is furrowed deeper than a mountain gorge. "Lord Modred . . . dead?" He bats at clouds that storm his brain. "But isn't he—?" He must be pointing at this fire now.

"How can that be when you yourself sang of the grim battle where he fell?" Regal indignation often cows more peaceable souls away from the truth they know. The poet stammers out apologies. Mother softens and warms, rewarding him with gentler words for his compliance.

The poet walks through mists that snare his mind as Mother pours more words into his ears, words she claims were always his. Even I, with a mind unfettered by drugged wine—I, who know first to last that the verses are mine—I find myself near to believing them as they fall from her mouth.

Against my eyelids I can see a strong-limbed Modred lusting for his father's queen. I plot, I pace, I bring false accusation against sweet Guinhwyfar's innocence. My treachery's unmasked, I rally my men to me and challenge my lord and sire on the battlefield of Camlann. Many good men fall to serve my wickedness. When truce is called, unhappy chance sends a serpent from the grass to sting a worthy fighter's heel—the poet cannot help but compare the subtle worm to me—the man draws steel, the peace is breached, battle rejoins. This time there can be no truce until my father and I stand face to face and Arthur—sun-king, bear-king, righteous champion—takes back the life he gave in an ill hour with a spear-thrust through my heart.

I do not die without some last harm done. Arthur is wounded by my sword, the great king lies near death. I hear the poet sobbing as Mother recounts the final verses of the song. I fancy that he never knew he had such talent in him! He is still sobbing as the wine's last effect takes hold

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and shifts him subtly into a shallow slumber. I crawl away from the fire so as not to wake him from this fragile doze.

I have to leave my staff behind. My knees shriek as I drag them over stones and roots, deeper into the lakeside wood. The smell of freezing earth is enough to make me drunk with a last cowardly desire to live until the spring's first greening. I will not tarry too long in worship over the perfection of each blade of grass, the pattern of loveliness written in each fallen leaf, the web my breath casts over the frosty air, for fear that these small, precious beauties make me a traitor to myself. Somewhere birds are singing dawnlight carols to a dying autumn sun whose rebirth I won't see.

For once I understand the strange Gethsemane tale Guinhwyfar used to tell at court. Before this, it always struck me odd that Jesus, being a god, didn't just rise up from among the Roman soldiers come to take him to his death and roar, "*Enough!* I will not submit to this!" I even asked her why he didn't burst into flame and devour them all with his divine splendor, the way Jupiter did to poor stupid Semele in the old story. Her answer was that thin-lipped, condescending smirk and the assurance that I could never hope to understand these Christian mysteries.

Well, if this hard road I follow ever ends, she'll learn how wrong she was. Her Jesus god has come to make me his brother. I understand him now. Will she ever?

They are waiting for me not too far off. It's a relief to see them. For awhile it seemed to me that I would never find them, yet here they are! Four of my trusted servants bide to meet me, to lift me from the dirt and bear me into the rough tent they have pitched in sight of the water. One lifts the leather flap and as I enter hands me the golden staff which is to be part of my regalia today. I'm just glad to have something strong to lean on again.

Guinhwyfar rises from her stool in a white rage when she sees me. For an instant I fear she may fly at me to scratch out my eyes. Then she recalls the drab nun's garb she wears, and realizes she does not dress for passion these days. A rage would ruin the waxen image she has made of herself, and so she folds her ivory hands into an attitude of prayer and lifts her lilting voice, politely requesting that her god smite me down into Hell.

I leave her to her devotions. There is too much to see to and too little time.

He is ready. He sits in the very siege that was his place while he dwelled under my roof. They have dressed him in an assortment of silks and armor such as no practical fighting man would wear. The gold crown is on his head and the gilded sword at his belt. They have even loaned him a captured Saxon long-ax for the occasion. (Father always decried

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the long-ax as better suited for chopping wood than flesh, but I must admit he does look superb.) His hair has been washed and combed, his beard trimmed, the stubble scraped from his neck and the tufts of wiry gray plucked from his ears and nostrils. They really shouldn't have gone to so much trouble. No one who matters will come close enough to see that Arthur's ears are clean.

"Welcome back, Father," I murmur, and lift the sword-worn right hand from his knee. Yes, the ring is there, just as I commanded. I turn the hand palm upmost and breathe a kiss against the calloused flesh.

Guinhwyfar is shocked when I summon a man to assist me to disrobe in her presence. There's no help for it: This tent is the only place I've got. She flings herself to her knees, amber beads clicking furiously between her fingers, and keeps her eyes on the ground. Is it for modesty's sake, or simply because she finds it makes her ill to gaze on anything untoward, misshapen, less than beautiful?

I regret the inconvenience I have put her to, this cold perfection of a queen—everything I have done to her and with her has left its mark like dog piss on snow: The false message that her lost lord was found and called for her by name, which was the ruse to bring her to my keep; the offer of my own men to escort her safely back to her convent, which was the means by which we kidnapped her and brought her here out of all hope of rescue; the enforced captivity in this rude tent, shared with the man whose bed she used to share, which was—

Well, which was some pure, true cruelty on my part, I confess. But she deserved it.

She deserted him! When the first tremors came, the hairline cracks flawing the golden mirror of a king's majesty, the first hints that slivers of the Arthur-oak were being nibbled away from the heartwood out, she burst into religion and fled. Who was there for him then as he slipped by inches deeper into the dark? Was her name on his lips when dusk charmed dire ghosts from his wandering mind? Her name . . . or Lancelot's perhaps; not mine. Yet both of them abandoned him to meet his wraiths alone. Where could I better study cruelty?

I think the truth is that I've done Guinhwyfar a favor, closeting her here with Father these few days. The Christians teach that it is good for the soul to confront the face of its sins. Or perhaps they don't. If I've been mistaken, it's too late now to do anything other for Guinhwyfar than say I'm sorry.

If she needs more than that, too bad.

All is ready now, except Guinhwyfar. I explain what's wanted of her and she balks. I expected this. I've had horses like her, the kind that roll their eyes until the white shows every time you urge them to do something to which they're not inclined. A little windfall apple by way of persuasion works wonders.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The windfall I show Guinhwyfar lies inside a gorgeous casket, set with gems, a treasure of itself. The quantity of gold it contains will buy her the establishment of her own abbey, herself the comfortably invisible crown of abbess. The warrior who carries it in keeping is my man, but he is also a Christian. She knows him, and trusts the holy oath he takes to deliver the treasure to her as soon as she has done my bidding.

She crosses her hands over her bosom and lets her head droop as she tells us, quite solemnly, that she will do whatever I say. *Not* because she covets that gold—oh, never!—but again, for Christian charity.

And so, with Christian charity paid, we may begin. Two of my men come to escort our lord from the tent. A tiringwoman arrives to give Guinhwyfar the silver-shot royal robes she must wear, and the diamond-kissed crown. I am depraved enough to steal a backward glance at Father's queen as she picks up each piece of her ordained dress. I gloat as yearning vanity strives against compulsive holiness in that birchtwig face.

The sun is a pale blotch of watered gold on the horizon. The mists are rising gray and white from the lake waters. The heavy barge is moored securely to the near shore, linked by other, more slender lines to the island. When they hear me give the signal, those who wait invisible among the dry brown reeds of Ynys-witrin, they will draw the vessel home.

Mother is already seated in the prow, her cloak cast aside, herself a blazon of jewels over black silk. When Guinhwyfar joins us, I don't think she'll like seeing a woman twice her age outshine her so extravagantly.

"Don't you think you're wearing a few too many necklaces for a woman in mourning?" I tease her.

"A *queen* in mourning, puppy," she corrects me. Her eyes sparkle with laughter. "Our rules are different. I thought you knew how much I hate black." Then without warning she rises from her place and crushes me to her bosom. "My babe." The words are husky and torn. "Oh, my beloved son."

She lets me go the moment she sees Guinhwyfar approach. We shall have no other parting. The white queen asks a few last frightened questions about the isle to which she is bound. She has heard stories, it seems, stories that have nothing to do with the adventures of her god and his followers. Can the Fey be trusted to keep faith? Don't they often steal fair mortal women? What guarantee does she have that the tall elfin knights of Ynys-witrin won't ravish her away?

I suppose it would be rude to offer her a mirror for an answer. Besides, she wouldn't know at all what I mean.

There is a bier amidships on the barge, a luxurious contrivance draped in sable damask bought for a fortune at the Londinium market. Pillars

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of gold hold up an embroidered canopy of black Gaza-cloth, diaphanous as smoke. While Guinhwyfar fusses with her skirt, complains that there is water oozing up through the carpets on the bottom of the barge, shows a soaked slipper to anyone who cares, I go to help my father.

He steps into the barge with a strength I hardly recognize after such a lengthy absence. Impatiently he shakes off the hands of my men as they try to lift him aboard. But when I extend my own hand, he stares at it awhile, then brushes it with his own in a purely ceremonial gesture of homage given and received.

"What now, my son?" he asks, and there are phantoms of the hero and the man asleep beneath those words. I show him the bier and the gilded steps by which he must mount to the top. "For me?" A corner of his mouth twitches. Is it laughter? "I thought I was well," he says.

Then the glimmer vanishes. He stands like deadwood beside the steps until my men carry him up and help him to lie down with his head on the cushions and his crown on his breast. He lies peacefully, a king-doll. When they come down again, I pull myself up the stairs to have a last look at his face.

"Where is he?" I whisper to wrinkles and emptiness and dust. And again, until tears threaten to choke off all breath, "Where is he? What have you done with my father?"

Under the bier there is plenty of room for someone of my size to sit. With such a spectacle as this funerary barge to fill the eye, who will notice if the damask draperies are drawn aside on this side or that? In the shadows, I feel around until I find the hunting horn I'll need to get us started.

Before I take breath for the blast, I pause to think if I have forgotten anything. My lands and my possessions are all distributed and disposed among my loyal people. I am dressed with suitable pomp for what awaits me. Mother has made a place of refuge within her villa walls for the nameless, witless old man who will come to live with her, and pet the cats, and tend the herb beds on his better days. She has few visitors, but if anyone asks they will hear of how this good man stood with Arthur at Mount Badon.

I guess that's everything.

The echoing call of the hunting horn of Faerie must wake a lonesome poet where he sleeps beside a fire gone cold. (All signs of other fires, other folk have been swept away by Mother's art.) He will hark to the sound and stumble from his campsite through the bracken to where a lake gleams green as glass. His head still rings with the grand verses he made the other night about the fall of Arthur, Britain's king, at Camlann. How wonderful to know that he could compose a tale so grand, so tragic! How strange that he has no other memory of Camlann than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his own verses. Modred dead, Arthur sorely wounded, a battle at which so many knights perished—and no idea at all from whom he heard the news. But—but it must have happened, or why would he make a song about it?

It happened. Oh yes, it happened as his song assures him it did, for as he stands trembling among the lakeside reeds, he sees a sight that strikes his small heart mute.

The water laps the shore, the birds of morning sing. There is no other sound to mark the passing of the king. White queen, black queen attend him as he sails across the holy lake to Ynys-witrin's halls. In majesty he departs, yet not to death but sleep he goes. The hands of Faerie heal his hurts; he shall return to conquer Britain's foes.

The words resound inside my head. Poet, if you are there, I wish I had the power to free them from my mind, to pour them into your hands like water. Let them spill away or hold them to your heart, but make the words you choose to take their place worthy of the man whose passing you witness here.

Arthur goes to his rest, but does not die. Do you see? Will your words make the others see it too—the people of the land, the little lordlings, the barbarous tribes? Arthur waits dreaming like the grain in the winter furrow, but he will come again, the green king, the sun-king, the bear-king rising from a sleep like death, renewed. He does not, will not, can not die!

My father cannot die.

I lift the curtain and see a solitary figure standing in the mists along the lakeside. The wind blows from that quarter and I imagine I can still detect my poet's perfume of stale beer. One hand goes up to touch brow, belly, breast and breast in the Christians' sign. He kneels where the reeds lisp secrets. Then the isle's curve hides us from his sight, and he from mine.

He will stay where he is, as he is, only for as long as the marvel has power to keep him from feeling the cold. Then he will stand, go to his horse and ride away. (A horse? Where did he get—? But here it is, and with his meager gear lashed behind the saddle. He will ride first and question Fortune after.)

Wherever he stops for the night, he will sing the tale of Camlann and Arthur's passing, because it is a very fine tale and he remembers that it is his to sing. In the drinking houses they will look at him as if he is mad—*What battle? We heard of no battle!*—but only for a time.

Because there will come sturdy men, fighting men, nine armed men out of the marshlands. Singly they will seek out every drinking house and market, every lord's keep and manor in the realm. They will share the tale of their greatest battle as payment for a night's shelter and a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mug of ale. *Oh, but I was at Camlann, where Arthur fell! Surely you remember Camlann of blood, dark Camlann, Camlann of Modred's death, of Arthur's doom?*

The peasants will not dare to contradict men like these—*Arthur's fall! Well, so that's what became of him. We heard nothing for so long that I wondered. Of course I remember!*—and the lords will half recall a poet who passed through their lands not so long ago and sang of just that battle. Before long, other poets will take up the tale, and the lords will be remembering how *they* were at glorious Camlann, at their true king's side. Maybe one of them will even be bold enough to claim that he stood with his lord in the lakeside dawn and saw the last of Arthur as the queens bore him away.

The barge bumps against the island's bank. I emerge from under the bier to greet my small, dark kindred. Mother has anticipated me ashore. The Fey cluster at her skirts, snap-eyed and merry as a revel of fieldmice. Still aboard, Guinhwyfar scans the isle in vain for any hope of the tall, elegant knights of Elfland. Poor cheated queen! I'm afraid all your ravishments must remain the stuff of romance.

They swarm up the steps to Arthur's bier and bring my father down. Guinhwyfar draws her gown aside from the taint of his touch as they pass her by. I lean over her shoulder to murmur, "It's not leprosy; it's worse. And if it's meant to find you, lady, the sorrow of it is you'll never know it has until too late." She stares at me with huge, shallow eyes, lips wobbling from the insult I've done to her pride. I know she slips my face over the image of the serpent in the garden tale when I add, "Even through convent walls, king's daughter; even though you've been a queen."

She folds her long white hands over her lily face and her shoulders shake. I have seen her strike this pose too many times at court to give it more than a passing bow, as to an old friend recognized. Let her tears be genuine, for once, even if they're only shed for herself.

There is a clamor on shore. The people of the isle fall back, drop to their knees. Only Mother has the right to stand, to greet the one who comes as an equal. As she moves forward, away from Father's side, I must scurry to take her place and let him lean on me.

Father's head moves slowly from side to side, mouth agape. Does he know where he is? Does he recall this place, these people? Does he wonder why we've brought him here? There is a winey smell of apples in the air, and the sweet bite of smoke from the burning wood of orchard trees past their bearing years. The earth has taught the Fey to waste nothing.

"Ynys-witrin." I send the whisper up to reach his ear. "The Lady's isle." I see his nostrils flare to catch the scent, but the memory flits through his mind and darts off into the rising sun.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And now she comes, the Lady. Pale Guinhwyfar melts like curd in a furnace before her majesty, black Morgan my mother cannot aspire to equal her sister queen for beauty. Small and dark like the folk she rules, her darkness glows more brave, more brilliant than any daystar queen or sovereign moon-mistress. Guinhwyfar once dazzled, Morgan smolders, but Vivian the Lady of this isle burns with flame that is all light, immortal.

The formalities are all family matters. It does not take long for Guinhwyfar to be sent back to the shore where my men await her. A few minutes more and Mother and Father too are taken from my sight. His hand clung to mine an instant when they came to lead him away to the boat on the far side of the island, but I don't think it was because he knew who I am or what awaits me. Mother went without a word—we have already said all that needs saying—and if I can bear to add the pain of truth to the burden I already carry, then I admit I said goodbye to my father years ago.

It is just Modred and the Fey.

"You've chosen this?" Queen Vivian eyes my princely robes, weighing their expense as if that were a gauge of my sincerity. "It's no good to either of us if you've been forced. The offering won't count, but you'll be just as dead."

"I've come of my own will," I say, "in return for favors given. Is that free enough? Will it do?"

An ember of the poet's earlier confusion glints in her eyes. "What we did for you, you could have done yourself on the shores of some other lake. The barge and its trappings are not beyond your means. You command men and slaves enough to bring this off without a bit of our aid."

Lady, there is no need for your puzzlement. I haven't asked you to understand me, just to kill me. I will tell you nothing that you do not need to know.

She sighs, and apple blossoms drop from her lips. Where they star the grass between us, hyacinth bells spring up in flourishes of unseasonable fragrance. "He never loved you. You were a disappointment to him."

"That's old news."

"Then why all this? Why purchase him so majestic a leavetaking? He could have remained what he was—an old man stricken weak-minded—and you could have remained—"

Alive? I will not say it, for I might laugh in her face. "Have you a use for me or not, Lady?" I put the question softly, knowing her reply.

There is a last shadow of regret that flashes in her ancient eyes before she makes the sign her people await. I hear the rumbling roar of the great oak they have felled and hollowed and fitted back together again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They trundle the mighty trunk down to the waterside and stand around it, staring at me. That unpolished hull is to be my passage to eternity.

The rites which my old master Merlin told me they practice on this isle are true, it appears. That wild winter when he disappeared—I wonder if it was to journey here and give himself up as the year's-wane offering? I suppose he might've simply frozen to death in a ditch somewhere, but I'd rather not know that. I glance out over the lake, as if I could hope to see Merlin's oak still drifting beneath the calm water.

"Thank you for your courtesy," I say to the crowd as I lean my hands on the open trunk. "For bringing this to me instead of the other way around. It's been a tiring day, I couldn't walk another step, and I don't think any of you could carry me." I am all smiles.

I climb into the tree unaided, only my golden staff to help me lever uncooperative limbs over the barky lip. The interior is smooth as riverstones, the bottom made soft by a mattress filled with sweet-scented herbs and blossoms. Every move I make as I settle onto my back presses more fragrance from it.

The Lady bends over me. In all my life I never could have hoped to have one so beautiful bring her lips so near to mine. If I steal a kiss, will it harm the sacrifice? Then she says, "To do so much for him when he never did the half for you . . . to let him drift into their legends even at the cost of your life here, and your fame in the times to come . . . they will remember you as a villain, Modred."

Her mouth is unresisting as I take my first and only kiss from a lovely woman. My lips curve up. "But they will remember me."

She imagines I have given her the answer to the riddle. She's wrong. The Modred they'll remember in the tales is good at duping queens. It's only fair I get in a little practice.

She gestures, and her servants serve me a wine that smells of summer mornings. There may be a potion concealed by the taste, a brew to make the sacrifice remain tractable or else a kinder draught to hurry me on my way. In either case, I'm grateful, and the wine itself is almost as fine as the Falernian.

She lifts her hands, and the cutaway slab of the oak rises with no hands laid on it. It lowers itself to a perfect landing, groove fitting snugly into groove, slicing away my last glimpse of the light. The whole tree rocks itself free of the earth and floats, it seems, by the power of the Lady's word. I sense too much air beneath me and not enough in here to keep me company for long. Then the sound of water caresses the walls of my coffin and the first cold trickles send spidery fingers in through cracks I cannot see.

However long I've left of life and breath, I feel neither sorrow, self-pity, nor longing for a chance to backtrack the hasty road that's brought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me here. I took it willingly for his sake, for the realm's and—let me be honest, dying—most of all, for mine.

No glamour of Fey, no book of wizardry, no skill with the sword or power of cloistered prayer can hope to equal what I have done this day. With words alone I've made my hero-father into the undying heart of this land, made him its ever-living guardian soul. With words alone I've given him a son he might be proud to love. The poets who come after my tame bard will all sing of how dearly Arthur loved his traitor-son, and so it will be. So it must: without great love there can be no great treachery.

As long as men sing Arthur, they must sing Modred too. Behind me I leave pain and loneliness, but with me I bring to birth a dream as grand as any of my father's. I perish to lie down with princes. I rise to live forever among kings. ●

THROUGH DINOSAUR EYES

Sandra J. Lindow

"Russell calls the model a dinosauroid, the intelligent creature that might have been—the assumed twentieth-century culmination of uninterrupted dinosaur evolution."

—John Noble Wilford, *The Riddle of the Dinosaur*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We talked about it at supper,
The intelligent, vaguely avian alien;
Dinosaur evolved.
The dinosaur, Stenonychosaurus,
Had bipedal carriage, opposable thumbs,
Brain to body weight equivalent
To the Late Cretacean mammals,
Forerunners of Homo Sapiens.

Neither obviously male or female,
The scaly skinned model has lean muscled limbs,
Long, three-digited hands and feet,
A runner's chest, deep and nippleless.
Chinless, hairless and outwardly sexless,
It stands poised and reflective,
Regarding its world calmly
Through luminous dinosaur eyes.

A world turned on dinosaur need—
Desire, competition, hunger, predation,
Hurrahs of hot-blooded hunters banding together,
Defending territory, raising young.
Nesting sites turn to cities,
The escalating complexity
Protecting an extended flock,
A world not as different as we thought.

As I lie next to you, husband, I think
It's not how they'd live, but how they'd love.
Would lovers first fed not by breast
But mouth to mouth on chewed meat
Still warm each other with kisses,
Losing themselves in lean and lipless love;
And lacking external genitalia, wouldn't they miss
Fitting together in the closest of all touches?

What would be the pleasure of love?
Perhaps, athletic as sparrows,
They'd tumble together.
Like mute swans, they'd mate for life,
Renewing their love each spring
In a frenzied, jubilant tryst;
Whose would be the better life?
I wonder as I turn out the light.

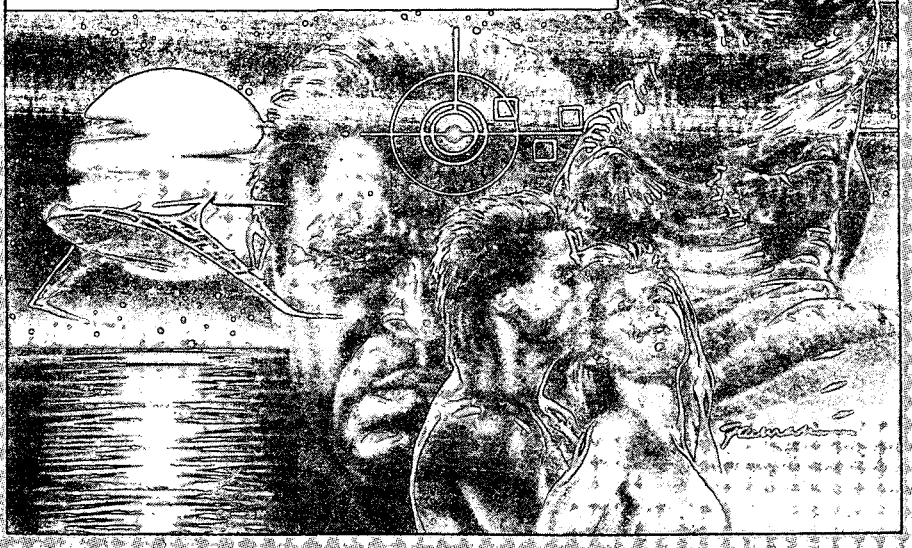
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WITH TWOCLICKS WATCHING

Rick Wilber

Rick Wilber is a faculty member of the school of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He is also the editor of the Tampa *Tribune's* "Fiction Quarterly," and the author of hundreds of nonfiction articles and reviews. Mr. Wilber's poems and short stories have been published in *Analog, Asimov's, F&SF, Alien Sex, Whisper of Blood*, and other magazines and anthologies.

art: Gary Freeman



LICENSED TO UMZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Twoclicks, Holman's owner, was a sloppy lover. Like all the S'hudonni, he was noisy at it out of the water. The sharp wet slaps of his bloated bulk against the deck and his crisp barks of delight cut right through the low rumble of *Tempest's* twin diesels.

Holman was at the helm. He watched with appropriate scientific detachment from the bridge as Twoclicks rolled his large mass over on his side to ease his ventral fin out of the way and enter the changer. She, in turn, angled to accept him, and grunted in feigned pleasure.

There were unpleasant sucking sounds.

The moon was nearly full, the Egmont Light a tiny offering off port, the Gulf nearly glass this close to shore. It was August, and the heat, even out on the water, was oppressive. Holman was sweating just standing at the wheel. Another mile in and the mosquitoes would find them, too. Twoclicks, of course, welcomed the heat, and the mosquitoes didn't care for him; they swarmed him, but never seemed to bite.

Freedom for Holman was just two hours away, when they would reach the tired old Pass-a-grille marina. Twoclicks had promised to sign the release papers there, have a bit of a ceremony for his indentured Earthie after all these good years of service.

Holman allowed himself a smile, though he knew it might be a dangerous couple of hours, the riskiest of this whole, odd little five-day holiday. They were running in at midnight to this shore, with its dozens of inlets and small bays that sheltered the smugglers who fueled the Florida District's violence.

Coming in at night was Twoclicks' idea, of course. The S'hudonni merchant liked the edge that came with risk. That's what the sex down below was probably all about, his way of adding to the night's tension, its heat. Disgusting old Twoclicks was down there with Lady Di, Holman's changer, feeding off the night's potential for danger.

Holman looked away from the sweaty, grappling bodies and stared instead toward the distant smudge of shoreline. This should be a good time, a pleasant time. He should be happy. Home the hero, home the great culturalist, having enlightened the cosmos about humanity. That was how the newsnets had billed it, anyway, for the first few days after he'd returned.

The nets were wrong. Holman snorted in disgust to think of how it had *really* been out there—the humiliation of it, his slow realization that he was not what he'd thought, not a great mind sharing wisdom with ethereal galactic sages. Instead, what he had really been was a sideshow, a carnival act. A whore.

Now he was back to the little fishing town where he'd grown up. And if there was no sense of accomplishment, he had hoped for at least some relief here—for a return to his studies, the chance to write a few learned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

books, to remember the best of what had happened and discard the greater part, the worst of it. He had thought that his dark comedy was finally over.

But even that wasn't to be. There was no joy to be had by coming home. Tommy was dying. His baby brother had a year left, maybe less.

Tommy, bitter Tommy, had told Holman all about it last night, had spat the news out angrily. A slowly swelling mass in the brain. Inoperable. There was nothing to be done except get comfortable, get ready, get resigned. Only a few months left.

Damn.

Holman shook his head. Poor hard-luck Tommy. Always just missing the brass ring, always grabbing for it but not quite catching it. Always angry and suspicious about what life had done to him, about his older brother's successes that magnified his own failures, about being left behind to handle family duties while his big brother went off to college, then off to fame and fortune, and then, unbelievably, off to the stars.

And now this final thing, as if to prove all those suspicions right.

Holman saw movement on the water. There was a low shadow to starboard, hard to see against the thin dark line of distant shore. One of the old marker buoys? Holman wished he had the S'hudonni nightglasses along so he could see what it was. But no, Twoclicks was determined to go primitive, that was the whole point of this absurd little vacation. Travel like the natives. Get to know the *real* Earth. Make love under the moon and the stars, the way Holman had described it before mounting the changer in a dozen or more cities on each of the Ten.

Holman heard heavy feet on the ladder behind him. His brother slowly clambered up onto the bridge to join him, squeezing his bulk through the narrow opening and out onto the platform. Tommy had put on weight in the years Holman had been gone—too much weight. The kid who'd walked and run everywhere twenty years before was now hidden deep in this massive body. He didn't walk *any*where these days, he'd said, it just hurt too goddamn much. Holman, always reasonably fit, looked rail-thin by comparison.

Tommy was still groggy with sleep and from the headaches that plagued him. Lady Di, on Twoclicks' orders, had taken Tommy to bed in the captain's quarters and had clearly worn him out. Holman smiled at that, recalling how Di had seduced Tommy with only a few coy phrases, a touch or two, that knowing smile. Holman nodded his head to Tommy in greeting as he came up next to him. Di was well-trained.

For his own part, Holman had gone from lust to hate to a strange unjudgmental acceptance of the changer. In a weird, unsatisfying way, he even *liked* Di. While she'd been acting oddly on this little outing, as if she had something to say to him but couldn't get the words out; she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was basically all right—honest, in her own way, more honest than most people, human or S'hudonni.

Weird constructs, they were; odd, expensive toys, these shapechangers—only the S'hudonni could have thought them up, and only the S'hudonni could have spent enough money to make them. But they were what they were, and that was all. There was nothing Lady Di could do about any of it, for instance, except to do what she was told and get on with business. Holman had come to know how that felt. You do what you have to do, that's all.

Tommy threw his arms out in a huge stretch, as if to embrace the sea, and then turned to look at his brother. When he spoke, it was with sarcasm, with a cutting edge to the thin, dry voice. "Frank," he drawled, "like you've been telling me, it must have been pure hell out there. Imagine trying to struggle along with just Lady Di as your playmate."

When Frank didn't respond, Tommy shook his head, and added, "Damn it, Frank, that was the best fuck I've ever had. Maybe the best fuck *anybody's* ever had. She's incredible."

Tommy, of course, hadn't yet seen what Lady Di looked like at the moment, rolling around all blubbery and damp underneath Twoclicks. In a minute, Holman figured, Tommy might notice them coupling below. If he did, it would certainly change his impression of the changer, and of just how enjoyable things had been out there among the stars for his older brother.

For the moment, Holman just smiled. Tommy wasn't easy to get along with, but he deserved a little fun. It hadn't been an easy life for him in the years since Holman had left.

Tommy had been there, the dutiful son, when both parents had died—Dad from that bad heart, Mom in the riots that came after the unsuccessful rebellion. It had been Tommy who'd taken care of the folks, watched them die, buried them, and then tried to keep the family shrimping business alive, tried to figure out how to survive in the new society that the S'hudonni had set up to replace the one they'd casually destroyed.

And Tommy had found a way. Holman had always admired that about his brother, that survival instinct that emerged through the bitterness. Tommy always scraped and clawed and bit and bounced back, always found a way to get by.

Now he ran a charter service out of Pass-a-grille for the new masters, catered to the S'hudonni's fondness for warm seas and humid nights—conditions that reminded them of S'hudon, or as close to S'hudon as they could get here on primitive, backward Earth.

Holman, to his great delight, had read about Tommy in a guidebook he'd found on Seventones. He'd finished his presentation in the late

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

morning, making love to Di before an audience of thirty or so academics who'd left their seats to gather close around and take notes, to whistle and click appreciatively to each other, to touch Holman's erection and collect drops of sweat off his back—the usual.

Then he'd wandered the canals for a few hours between presentations, and there, in what amounted to a travel agency, had found a listing for Tommy and the charters he offered out of Tampa Bay.

Holman had laughed out loud in joy to read it, his first real laughter in months. So Tommy was finally making it!

And now *this*, this cancer—one they might have been able to buy Tommy some time from not too long ago, before the Landings, before the changes. No wonder the bitterness now ran so deep.

"There's something out there, off starboard," Holman said to Tommy, distracting his brother to avoid another confrontation. "See it?"

Tommy stared, nodded. Of course he'd seen it. Tommy had always understood the sea better than his brother, had never turned away from the sea as Frank had.

"Yeah, pretty small," Tommy said, rubbing his temples to ease the headache that followed him everywhere. "Gun-runners, probably. Or the local militia. Nobody *good*, that's for sure. Not here. Not now. They'll probably ignore us unless we bother them."

There was a sibilant whistle and several sharp clicks from below. Holman clicked back, and ended with a three-note. His S'hudonni was pitch perfect, another reason to be glad the servitude was almost over. He'd had enough of the language of the masters, was ashamed that he'd learned it so well.

"Twoclicks heard us talking." Holman translated for his brother. "He wants to know how close they are. I told him we weren't sure, a mile, maybe. Hard to tell in this moonlight."

There was a quiet splash from below. Twoclicks had gone over the side to check out the other boat. The S'hudonni could swim all day at thirty knots or more, Holman had seen it done. Once, on Downtone, Twoclicks and a couple of his royal friends all out on a hunting party had circled a kind of whale thing for more than an hour, teasing the desperate creature until they'd finally rammed it repeatedly to finish it off. Their heads—their whole bodies, really—were built for that kind of slamming collision of cartilage and bone into prey. Straight on at full speed and head-first into trouble, that was the S'hudonni way. They weren't a subtle people.

What Holman remembered best about the incident was how much Twoclicks and his friends had enjoyed it. They were like that, the S'hudonni, cruel at times just for amusement, for the enjoyment of the power they held.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Holman hadn't told the story to Tommy. Like a lot of people here in the tattered old States, Tommy still seemed to believe in the vision the S'hudonni had offered of Earth's golden future. In spite of the present conditions, Tommy still thought that things would get better, that the lean times would end, that the long-promised profits would finally roll in, that the door to the stars would open at last for people like him, for ambitious people, for hard-working people willing to take a risk to build a bright new future.

Others, like the gun-runners out there, were less optimistic. There was a whole underground movement in this part of what had once been the old United States, and the movement still fought its nagging, annoying little war against S'hudon.

It was a stupid fight, unwinnable, and it had cost dearly. And it could cost *worse*. Holman had seen what the S'hudonni could do when they really wanted to, had watched a city melt in retribution for a major uprising on Endtone.

It was good that the gun-runners and the resistance movement they supplied hadn't been more successful here. A greater success would kill them all, and a lot of others along with them. Just continuing to put up a struggle meant that the S'hudonni's technology embargo of Earth was still on, would stay on. You can't gain the benefits if you don't play the game S'hudon's way.

On the deck below, the changer was shaping back to human, back to the Lady Di form that Holman knew from a thousand encounters.

Tommy didn't see her shaping, which was okay with Holman. Holman didn't know how Tommy would react to seeing the change take place, to watching the gross form melt and blur until that startling beauty somehow emerged from within it.

A few moments later, Di, tall, thin, and perfect now, rose from the deck and walked over to the ladder to join them on the platform. "Hello, you two," she said, with that pleasant lilt she'd developed, almost an Irish ring to her voice, Holman thought. He didn't know where she'd learned it.

"Twoclicks decided to check things out?" he asked her.

"He said that it sounded like fun. And he likes this warm water."

"Hell," said Holman, "that's damn risky! If they see him, it'll just piss them off. And he's not screened, of course, right?"

"You know he's not, Frank. That was the whole point of this trip, to go native. The only implant he left in was the com unit."

Holman didn't respond to that, just shook his head. Damn Twoclicks. Always looking for a little edge of excitement—and this time it might get him in real trouble.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two dull pops echoed across the water, and Tommy grunted. "Rifles. I saw the muzzle flashes. They're shooting at him."

There were more flashes, and then the brief burp of an automatic weapon.

The changer tilted her head. "I've lost contact with him."

She turned to look at Holman. "Frank, we all need him alive. Should I shape and go search for him?"

"Not yet," Holman said. "Give him a minute."

"The gun-runners are circling, I don't think they've seen us yet," said Tommy, staring toward the distant boat. He listened to the growl of its engines, then said, "I *know* that boat: that's *Serpent*. It's an old scarab, overpowered, quick. Belongs to the Nathan brothers." He shook his head. "Mean sons of bitches."

Damn.

Di was right, they all needed Twoclicks alive. Holman knew what would happen to them if Twoclicks were killed. A S'hudonni murdered by Earthies? This whole coast would be in an uproar. Dozens would die in retribution, hundreds perhaps. Holman and his brother wouldn't last twenty-four hours. Lady Di would be destroyed as soon as her evidence was taken.

A long few minutes passed, the mutter of the other boat a constant worry in the distance, *Tempest* throttled all the way back. Holman was about to tell Di to shape and go search for Twoclicks when there was a splash in the glassy water. "Down there," Tommy said, and pointed over the side.

The water swirled, phosphorescent in the moonlight. They glimpsed a dorsal fin, a bulky body, air jetting out of a blowhole, a feebly waving hand at the end of a short arm.

"Help me get him in," Holman said, scrambling down the ladder to the main deck. Di was right behind him. Tommy stayed at the helm.

There were two wounds, neither one serious. Twoclicks would be fine as soon as they could get him to the medcot on his ship.

The first wound was from a slug that had torn its way through the thick blubber behind the dorsal fin, smashing the com implant and then passing through. The wound bled cleanly.

Another slug was imbedded in the ventral fin, and had just missed the sheathed penis. Holman thought the wound was fitting, but didn't whistle that thought to Twoclicks.

That wound, too, seemed clean. Twoclicks was in considerable pain, but not much danger. Holman used Tommy's first-aid kit to staunch the bleeding and left it at that.

Holman felt Tommy throw the throttles forward. The gun-runners must have finally seen them, and were coming to check them out. Tommy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was going to make a run for it, but *Tempest* wasn't built for speed, and the gun-runners' scarab was.

Twoclicks whistled to him. Holman barely heard the tones through the engine noise, but got the message.

"He's tired of messing around with these guys," he said to Di. "Fun's over. Call the screamship, and let's end this thing now."

There was a pause. The changer tilted her head in concentration, then nodded. "It's done. Ten minutes."

Holman patted Twoclicks' side. For all the hate he'd like to muster against the flabby old con artist, Holman had to admit to a certain reluctant admiration for him.

Twoclicks was of royal blood on S'hudon, but from a failed family, all lineage and no money. He'd made the classic S'hudonni turn toward trade as a way out of his aristocratic poverty. Holman and his reproductive show-and-tell had been an academic scam that was one in a long line of minor financial successes.

Holman had spent six months on S'hudon itself, had seen the decayed family manor in a minor island's steamy tidal swamp, had heard the family story, and had even been treated with a bit of respect for a time—and then had been told to show the family how Earthies reproduce.

The family had charged admission for the next several months, until the novelty wore off, and then Twoclicks had taken them back on the road.

There was a pained, thin whistle from Twoclicks. Holman listened, then clicked and whistled back. Twoclicks was actually saying thanks, the old bastard. Holman told him to shut up, the ship was coming. Twoclicks' membranes slid up over the small eyes, and then they closed.

The gun-runners' scarab was clearly visible now, a few minutes away, no more. It was going to be close. Tommy, up on the flying bridge, kept turning to look at the boat angling toward them. Holman wished he hadn't told Tommy to get rid of the weapons before they'd started this little jaunt. The hell with Twoclicks' rules, that rifle and old .38 would be useful right now.

Di sat down next to Holman and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"He'd be excited about all this if he weren't in such pain," she said, nodding toward Twoclicks.

Holman agreed, studying her face as he did so. She was achingly beautiful: high cheekbones, light blue eyes, blond hair pulled back now into a ponytail. A perfect smile. Perfect love-making.

No question. The S'hudonni were great engineers.

"Holman," she asked, "will we get out of this?"

He shrugged. "You can always shape into S'hudonni and swim away from it. No use getting hurt if you don't have to."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She laughed at that idea. "So the S'hudonni could just destroy me later? No, I'll stay."

Then she smiled that slight smile that he could, sometimes, forget was artificial. "Twoclicks asked me to talk with you, Holman. I was going to do it sooner, but the moment never came."

She paused, reached out to touch his bare shoulder. Her touch was warm, caring. He always wondered how she did that.

"Holman, he wants you to sign on again, for another tour of the Ten. He'll give you very favorable terms."

Holman just looked at her for a moment. Finally he laughed, bitterly, and shook his head. "You've got to be kidding, Di. Sign on *again?* God, I've been counting the days until today, waiting for it to end. I'm tired of being a porn show for the Empire's idle rich and a few mildly interested academics. I've had it with this, Di. You know that. Done. Forever."

He smiled back at her, tight. "I'm home, Di. I'm staying here. Besides, my brother needs me."

"No," she said. "Your brother needs S'hudon. Your brother needs Twoclicks."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We know about your brother. Twoclicks can arrange for him to be healthy, to live a good, long life."

Holman stared at her. "That's forbidden. Absolutely. A technology transfer like that while there's still *fighting* going on here? If S'hudon found out that Twoclicks had even made the offer, he'd be exiled. Or worse."

"Twoclicks will take the risk, Frank. It can be done. Tommy can live. He'll think he's gone into a remission, one that never ends. He has a heart attack on the way, too, did you know that? I scanned him when we made love. There's an 80 percent blockage. That will be taken care of, as well."

"And the price?"

"You sign up for another tour. Favorable terms, complete care. An account here that will be enormous by the time you return."

"And fuck you twice a day or more, for an audience."

"And *make love* to me, Frank." She smiled. "Has it been that bad?"

There were times she was so damn human, he had to force himself to remember the artifice of it. Maybe that was what he hated the most about himself, about the whole thing: the way he *forgot* when he was with her, forgot everything—the indenture contract, her falsehood, the audience, and the humiliation of it all.

There was something very primitive about it, the rutting native from Earth mounting the mechanical seed collector. He wanted to think better of himself. He wanted to not *want* her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But, all too often, in spite of everything, he lost himself in the delight of her. God, he loved it. He loved making love to her.

This was a terrible admission. There was an enormous self-loathing to it, an ultimate admission of his own weakness. He wondered, momentarily, about taking his life right here, right now. Just jump over the side and start swimming, let the warm water take him, end it. How long could he stand the self-hate if he went back out there?

But Tommy, poor damn Tommy. Holman sat back on his rump and stared toward the approaching boat. In the distance there was a high scream. Twoclicks' screamship. It would be here in a minute or two.

He put his hand back on Twoclicks' huge back. Di spoke.

"You can't tell your brother, Holman. He can't know how it happened, how he went into remission. Twoclicks won't take that chance. Just tell Tommy that Twoclicks has made you an offer you can't refuse, that's all. That you've signed another contract. One more tour."

"Tommy will think I'm leaving him here to die alone. We're the only family left for each other, you know."

"But he *won't* die, Holman. He'll be here when you get back. Older, wiser, richer. Both of you. You can tell him then."

"Sure. Wiser. Richer. I leave for the stars again while he stays here, alone, to die. That's how he'll see it. God, he hates me enough for not being here when the folks died! He'll hate me. Despise me. He'll see this as proof of everything he thinks about me, that I abandoned them, just got my lucky break and left the whole damn family hanging."

"He'll be wrong about that. And he'll *live*, Holman. And he'll be successful. Twoclicks can arrange a few contracts for him."

The scream grew in intensity. There was a shout from Tommy. Holman looked up at his brother, who pointed toward the horizon line, toward the deadly white apparition of the screamship.

It looked for all the worlds like a whale, a giant, huge pale thing that screamed in over their heads and paused abruptly over the scarab, no more than a hundred yards away now.

A bright beam flared down from the screamship. The Nathan boys, screaming, jumped overboard and splashed away while the beam tightened, constricted on the scarab.

There was a dull explosion, a white blossoming.

Twoclicks whistled in approval. Tommy had come down from the bridge and stood next to Holman as they watched the bright flaring off starboard.

"Jesus," Tommy said. "How do they do that?"

"That's a suppressor field over the boat," Holman told him. "Contains and amplifies the heat energy."

Tommy looked out at the white flare of heat. "What about the Nathan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

boys, Frank? Ask him about them. Is the ship going to kill them? Jesus, Frank, I grew up with those guys, you know. We went crabbing together as kids."

Holman could only shake his head. "They *shot* at him, Tommy. They tried to kill him. You know how the S'hudonni are."

Tommy looked at his older brother. He knew. "But you could talk to him, Frank, ask him for a favor. God, he thinks of you as a friend."

Holman laughed. The hell with it, maybe it was time for Tommy to find out the difference between a friend and a slave. "A *favor*, Tommy? Christ. Let me explain something to you. Twoclicks is . . ."

"Holman," said Di, pointing, "over there. Both of them. Coming this way."

Holman could see them, both swimming strongly toward *Tempest.*

"I'll get the grappling hook," said Tommy.

There was a grunt from behind them and a dull series of clicks punctuated by a high, thin, angry whistle.

"Don't bother," said Holman, and watched impassively as Twoclicks, ignoring the pain from his flesh wounds, went back over the side.

Holman and his brother watched, saying nothing, as the Nathan boys approached, their strokes weaker now, both of them struggling, too tired to call for help.

Fifteen yards out, no more, Twoclicks rammed the first one. There was only the quick impression of his dorsal fin in the dark water, than a loud exhale and a look of surprise from one of the Nathans as he was pushed hard away from *Tempest.* A second later, he was yanked under.

"Frank!" said Tommy, turning to look at his brother, eyes wide. "We've got to stop him! We've got to make him stop!"

Di came up toward Tommy, put her arms around him from behind, hugged him, said quietly, "We can't, Tommy. Twoclicks is getting even now, that's all. It's just the way they are, the S'hudonni."

"But . . ."

She came around to face him. She was achingly beautiful. Holman, despite himself, despite the inherent lie in her beauty, found himself wanting her.

She leaned forward and kissed Tommy lightly on the cheek.

"We just have to let it be, Tommy. It's all we can do."

There was a roiling in the water where the first one had gone under. The other Nathan boy finally yelled for help. "Tommy! I know that's you! Tommy Holman, you son-of-a-bitch, help me! You got to help me!"

"Frank," Tommy was forcing himself to say it calmly, rationally. "Frank, let me help him. If you won't do anything, at least let me."

Holman just watched the swimmer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Di put her arms around Tommy's neck, then turned his face away from the scene and kissed him.

Holman waited impassively. There was a surreal moment of quiet on the water, a frozen few seconds, and then Twoclicks emerged in a powerful leap, arcing high and beautiful in the moonlight before diving cleanly back into the sea to disappear beneath the swimmer.

The Nathan boy struggled to tread water. "Tommy! Frank! *God!*" he said, and then Twoclicks struck him from below and he was lifted nearly out of the water by the force of the impact. Holman heard breaking bone and tearing cartilage as Nathan's neck snapped back. The body fell back into the water, and Twoclicks struck him again, and then a final time, before dragging him under.

Di reached down to Tommy's hands and pulled them up around her waist. Then, touching his face, smiling that perfect smile, she led him toward the cabin, toward a kind of satisfaction, a kind of delight, he'd never known until she had shown it to him. For four steps, mesmerized, he followed her.

Then he stopped. "Christ! God Almighty, Frank! Those were the *Nathan* boys out there." He turned back, away from Di, to face his brother. He trembled with anger, struggling to contain it. "We didn't help them," he said slowly, deliberately. "You just let him *kill* them."

Holman didn't try to explain. Off starboard, the Nathans' boat settled, hissing and crackling, into the Gulf, and then, finally, disappeared. The screamship drifted over the scene for a few more seconds, and then arced high into the night and was gone.

Holman reached down to help Twoclicks climb back aboard; he was just grabbing the tiny arms, when Tommy crashed into him from behind.

"You bastard!" Tommy yelled, and wrestled Holman to the deck. Twoclicks splashed back into the water. Di watched passively.

"You son of a bitch!" Tommy rolled over on top of Holman, grabbed him by the shoulders, and slammed him back against the deck once, twice, a third time. "Goddamn it, Frank! Look what you've turned into! Look what's *happening* to you!"

Holman didn't fight back.

Tommy slapped him, hard, across the face, then shook him by the shoulders again, crying now, tears bubbling out onto that flabby face. "Frank. Frank. Frank," he kept saying.

In their youth, they had fought often, the sloppy wrestling tussles of brothers. Frank was four years older, and too strong, too tough, for Tommy. Their father, a strong, quiet man, a high-school history teacher, would pry them apart.

Later, Frank had come home from college to find a different Tommy, a tougher one, a combative fullback now on the high-school football team.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The two played basketball, one on one, and Tommy, for the first time in a thousand such games, expected to win. Frank, with a long, soft jumper at the end, had won instead. In anger and frustration, Tommy had picked a fight, and the two had squared off to punch it out, no playful wrestling this time.

Their mother, a small, gentle woman, had watched from the kitchen window and come out to break it up. She had stepped between them, and the anger evaporated.

But mother was gone now. And so was Dad.

Tommy pulled back a fist, cocked it, and punched Frank hard across the left cheek, cutting him. Blood spurted out.

"Goddamn it, Frank. Just goddamn it!" He pulled his arm back for another blow. Holman lay there, waiting for it, saying nothing, making no move to defend himself.

There was a moment's hesitation. Tommy looked down at his older brother, the successful one, the famous one. "Oh, hell," he said, quietly now, "you're pitiful, Frank." And he lowered his fist.

He stood, looked down at Frank, shook his head, and then walked away, back toward the ladder to the bridge. He clambered up, took the wheel.

"Pull Twoclicks in," Tommy said. "Let's get going."

An hour later, at the dock, Tommy tied *Tempest* up and walked away, saying nothing when Holman told him that he'd signed on again with Twoclicks, a six-year tour this time. Too good a package to turn down. They'd leave about dawn.

They didn't talk about death, about the Nathans, or cancer. Holman didn't try to explain about Di, about the changes.

Twelve hours later, out near the jump point, with Twoclicks watching and commenting, Holman made love to Di. It was very, very polished, but Twoclicks thought perhaps the opening moments of foreplay lacked spontaneity. They only had five shipdays before the first performance, he reminded them, and he wondered if some of the lovely passion he'd seen between Holman and his brother could be brought to this performance with Di.

Holman chose to let the swollen cheek heal on its own, without any attention from the ship's medcot. There would be, he hoped, a scar.

In Pass-a-grille, Tommy counted his savings. With the bonus from Twoclicks, he was in good financial shape for the first time in years, could afford to fix *Tempest* up a bit, maybe sell it later when the cancer really caught hold and he'd need the cash.

For now, though, Tommy felt strangely good, the headache gone for a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

change. In fact, Tommy couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this fine. Maybe it was the sex with Di, or maybe the fight with his brother, letting him get rid of all that old anger, clearing things out.

He was glad Frank was gone, in fact. Hell, he'd handled Mom and Dad's death alone, without Frank, and he'd handle whatever the future brought without him, too.

It was hard to worry about the future when he felt so *good*, though. He found himself whistling, grinning up at the sunny sky. Maybe he'd take a walk.

The hell with Frank—he certainly didn't need *him*.

THE MUTANT RAIN FOREST MEETS THE SEA

All-night cantinas are still.
Shabby *film-noir* hotels
are steeped in shadow
deeper than their stains.

The vines are everywhere,
like scouts of an army
hard upon their heels,
like mad organic lace,

a grand ophidian opulence
releafing the listing
masts that dot the harbor,
caging the empty plazas

and abandoned streets
in tendrils that stray
along pastel walls,
across rust tile roofs,

twining through windows
with sinuous grace,
toppling lamps aside,
indifferent to remains,

mute green strength,
blind and vegetative,
about to pull the city
down into its waves.

—Bruce Boston

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Greg Egan

THE EXTRA

Daniel Gray thought he'd found the perfect way to extend his life indefinitely . . .

art: Steve Cavallo

"The Extra" by Greg Egan. Copyright © 1990 by Greg Egan. First published in *Eidolon #2*, August 1990.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Daniel Gray didn't merely arrange for his Extras to live in a building within the grounds of his main residence—although that in itself would have been shocking enough. At the height of his midsummer garden party, he had their trainer march them along a winding path which took them within meters of virtually every one of his wealthy and powerful guests.

There were five batches, each batch a decade younger than the preceding one, each comprising twenty-five Extras (less one or two here and there; naturally, some depletion had occurred, and Gray made no effort to hide the fact). Batch A were forty-four years old, the same age as Gray himself. Batch E, the four-year-olds, could not have kept up with the others on foot, so they followed behind, riding an electric float.

The Extras were as clean as they'd ever been in their lives, and their hair—and beards in the case of the older ones—had been laboriously trimmed, in styles that amusingly parodied the latest fashions. Gray had almost gone so far as to have them clothed—but after much experimentation he'd decided against it; even the slightest scrap of clothing made them look *too* human, and he was acutely aware of the boundary between impressing his guests with his daring, and causing them real discomfort. Of course, naked, the Extras looked *exactly* like naked humans, but in Gray's cultural milieu, stark naked humans *en masse* were not a common sight, and so the paradoxical effect of revealing the creatures' totally human appearance was to make it easier to think of them as less than human.

The parade was a great success. Everyone applauded demurely as it passed by—in the context, an extravagant gesture of approval. They weren't applauding the Extras themselves, however impressive they were to behold; they were applauding Daniel Gray for his audacity in breaking the taboo.

Gray could only guess how many people in the world had Extras; perhaps the wealthiest ten thousand, perhaps the wealthiest hundred thousand. Most owners chose to be discreet. Keeping a stock of congenitally brain-damaged clones of oneself—in the short term, as organ donors; in the long term (once the techniques were perfected), as the recipients of brain transplants—was not illegal, but it wasn't widely accepted. Any owner who went public could expect a barrage of anonymous hate mail, intense media scrutiny, property damage, threats of violence—all the usual behavior associated with the public debate of a subtle point of ethics. There had been legal challenges, of course, but time and again the highest courts had ruled that Extras were not human beings. Too much cortex was missing; if Extras deserved human rights, so did half the mammalian species on the planet. With a patient, skilled trainer, Extras could learn to run in circles, and to perform the simple, repetitive

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

exercises that kept their muscles in good tone, but that was about the limit. A dog or a cat would have needed brain tissue *removed* to persuade it to live such a boring life.

Even those few owners who braved the wrath of the fanatics, and bragged about their Extras, generally had them kept in commercial stables—in the same city, of course, so as not to undermine their usefulness in a medical emergency, but certainly not within the electrified boundaries of their own *homes*. What ageing, dissipated man or woman would wish to be surrounded by reminders of how healthy and vigorous they might have been, if only they'd lived their lives differently?

Daniel Gray, however, found the contrasting appearance of his Extras entirely pleasing to behold, given that he, and not they, would be the ultimate beneficiary of their good health. In fact, his athletic clean-living brothers had already supplied him with two livers, one kidney, one lung, and quantities of coronary artery and mucous membrane. In each case, he'd had the donor put down, whether or not it had remained strictly viable; the idea of having imperfect Extras in his collection offended his aesthetic sensibilities.

After the appearance of the Extras, nobody at the party could talk about anything else. Perhaps, one stereovision luminary suggested, now that their host had shown such courage, it would at last became fashionable to flaunt one's Extras, allowing full value to be extracted from them; after all, considering the cost, it was a crime to make use of them only in emergencies, when their pretty bodies went beneath the surgeon's knife.

Gray wandered from group to group, listening contentedly, pausing now and then to pluck and eat a delicate spice-rose or a juicy claret-apple (the entire garden had been designed specifically to provide the refreshments for this annual occasion, so everything was edible, and everything was in season). The early afternoon sky was a dazzling uplifting blue and he stood for a moment with his face raised to the warmth of the sun. The party was a complete success. Everyone was talking about him. He hadn't felt so happy in years.

"I wonder if you're smiling for the same reason I am."

He turned. Sarah Brash, the owner of Continental Bio-Logic, and a recent former lover, stood beside him, beaming in a faintly unnatural way. She wore one of the patterned scarves which Gray had made available to his guests; a variety of gene-tailored insects roamed the garden, and her particular choice of scarf attracted a bee whose painless sting contained a combination of a mild stimulant and an aphrodisiac.

He shrugged. "I doubt it."

She laughed and took his arm, then came still closer and whispered, "I've been thinking a very wicked thought."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He made no reply. He'd lost interest in Sarah a month ago, and the sight of her in this state did nothing to rekindle his desire. He had just broken off with her successor, but he had no wish to repeat himself. He was trying to think of something to say that would be offensive enough to drive her away, when she reached out and tenderly cupped his face in her small, warm hands.

Then she playfully seized hold of his sagging jowls, and said, in tones of mock aggrievement, "Don't you think it was terribly selfish of you, Daniel? You gave me your body . . . but you didn't give me your *best* one."

Gray lay awake until after dawn. Vivid images of the evening's entertainment kept returning to him, and he found them difficult to banish. The Extra that Sarah had chosen—C7, one of the twenty-four-year-olds—had been muzzled and tightly bound throughout, but it had made copious noises in its throat, and its eyes had been remarkably expressive. Gray had learnt, years ago, to keep a mask of mild amusement and boredom on his face, whatever he was feeling; to see fear, confusion, distress, and ecstasy, nakedly displayed on features that, in spite of everything, were unmistakably his own, had been rather like a nightmare of losing control.

Of course, it had also been as inconsequential as a nightmare; *he* had not lost control for a moment, however much his animal look-alike had rolled its eyes, and moaned, and trembled. His appetite for sexual novelty aside, perhaps he had agreed to Sarah's request for that very reason: to see this primitive aspect of himself unleashed, without the least risk to his own equilibrium.

He decided to have the creature put down in the morning; he didn't want it corrupting its clone-brothers, and he couldn't be bothered arranging to have it kept in isolation. Extras had their sex drives substantially lowered by drugs, but not completely eliminated—that would have had too many physiological side-effects—and Gray had heard that it took just one clone who had discovered the possibilities to trigger widespread masturbation and homosexual behavior throughout the batch. Most owners would not have cared, but Gray wanted his Extras to be more than merely healthy; he wanted them to be *innocent*, he wanted them to be *without sin*. He was not a religious man, but he could still appreciate the emotional power of such concepts. When the time came for his brain to be moved into a younger body, he wanted to begin his new life with a sense of purification, a sense of rebirth.

However sophisticated his amorality, Gray freely admitted that at a certain level, inaccessible to reason, his indulgent life sickened him, as surely as it sickened his body. His family and his peers had always, unequivocally, encouraged him to seek pleasure, but perhaps he had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been influenced—subconsciously and unwillingly—by ideas which still prevailed in other social strata. Since the late twentieth century, when—in affluent countries—cardiovascular disease and other "diseases of lifestyle" had become the major causes of death, the notion that health was a reward for virtue had acquired a level of acceptance unknown since the medieval plagues. A healthy lifestyle was not just pragmatic, it was *righteous*. A heart attack or a stroke, lung cancer or liver disease—not to mention AIDS—was clearly a *punishment* for some vice that the sufferer had chosen to pursue. Twenty-first century medicine had gradually weakened many of the causal links between lifestyle and life expectancy—and the advent of Extras would, for the very rich, soon sever them completely—but the outdated moral overtones persisted nonetheless.

In any case, however fervently Gray approved of his gluttonous, sedentary, drug-hazed, promiscuous life, a part of him felt guilty and unclean. He could not wipe out his past, nor did he wish to, but to discard his ravaged body and begin again in blameless flesh would be the perfect way to neutralize this irrational self-disgust. He would attend his own cremation, and watch his "sinful" corpse consigned to "hellfire"! Atheists, he decided, are not immune to religious metaphors; he had no doubt that the experience would be powerfully moving, liberating beyond belief.

Three months later, Sarah Brash's lawyers informed him that she had conceived a child (which, naturally, she'd had transferred to an Extra surrogate), and that she cordially requested that Gray provide her with fifteen billion dollars to assist with the child's upbringing.

His first reaction was a mixture of irritation and amusement at his own naïveté. He should have suspected that there'd been more to Sarah's request than sheer perversity. Her wealth was comparable to his own, but the prospect of living for centuries seemed to have made the rich greedier than ever; a fortune that sufficed for seven or eight decades was no longer enough.

On principle, Gray instructed his lawyers to take the matter to court—and then he began trying to ascertain what his chances were of winning. He'd had a vasectomy years ago, and could produce records proving his infertility, at least on every occasion he'd had a sperm count measured. He couldn't *prove* that he hadn't had the operation temporarily reversed, since that could now be done with hardly a trace, but he knew perfectly well that the Extra was the father of the child, and he could prove *that*. Although the Extras' brain damage resulted solely from fetal microsurgery, rather than genetic alteration, all Extras were genetically tagged with a coded serial number, written into portions of DNA which had no active function, at over a thousand different sites.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What's more, these tags were always on *both* chromosomes of each pair, so any child fathered by an Extra would necessarily inherit all of them. Gray's biotechnology advisers assured him that stripping these tags from the zygote was, in practice, virtually impossible.

Perhaps Sarah planned to freely admit that the Extra was the father, and hoped to set a precedent making its owner responsible for the upkeep of its human offspring. Gray's legal experts were substantially less reassuring than his geneticists. Gray could prove that the Extra hadn't raped her—as she no doubt knew, he'd taped everything that had happened that night—but that wasn't the point; after all, consenting to intercourse would not have deprived her of the right to an ordinary paternity suit. As the tapes also showed, Gray had known full well what was happening, and had clearly approved. That the late Extra had been unwilling was, unfortunately, irrelevant.

After wasting an entire week brooding over the matter, Gray finally gave up worrying. The case would not reach court for five or six years, and was unlikely to be resolved in less than a decade. He promptly had his remaining Extras vasectomized—to prove to the courts, when the time came, that he was not irresponsible—and then he pushed the whole business out of his mind.

Almost.

A few weeks later, he had a dream. Conscious all the while that he was dreaming, he saw the night's events re-enacted, except that this time it was *he* who was bound and muzzled, slave to Sarah's hands and tongue, while the Extra stood back and watched.

But . . . had they merely swapped places, he wondered, or had they swapped *bodies?* His dreamer's point of view told him nothing—he saw all three bodies from the outside—but the lean young man who watched bore Gray's own characteristic jaded expression, and the middle-aged man in Sarah's embrace moaned and twitched and shuddered, exactly as the Extra had done.

Gray was elated. He still knew that he was only dreaming, but he couldn't suppress his delight at the inspired idea of keeping *his old body* alive with the Extra's brain, rather than consigning it to flames. What could be more controversial, more outrageous, than having not just his Extras, but *his own discarded corpse*, walking the grounds of his estate? He resolved at once to do this, to abandon his long-held desire for a symbolic cremation. His friends would be shocked into the purest admiration—as would the fanatics, in their own way. True infamy had proved elusive; people had talked about his last stunt for a week or two, and then forgotten it—but the midsummer party at which the guest of honor was Daniel Gray's old body would be remembered for the rest of his vastly prolonged life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Over the next few years, the medical research division of Gray's vast corporate empire began to make significant progress on the brain transplant problem.

Transplants between newborn Extras had been successful for decades. With identical genes, and having just emerged from the very same womb (or from the anatomically and biochemically indistinguishable wombs of two clone-sister Extras), any differences between donor and recipient were small enough to be overcome by a young, flexible brain.

However, older Extras—even those raised identically—had shown remarkable divergences in many neural structures, and whole-brain transplants between them had been found to result in paralysis, sensory dysfunction, and sometimes even death. Gray was no neuroscientist, but he could understand roughly what the problem was: Brain and body grow and change together throughout life, becoming increasingly reliant on each other's idiosyncrasies, in a feed-back process riddled with chaotic attractors—hence the unavoidable differences, even between clones. In the body of a human (or an Extra), there are thousands of sophisticated control systems which may *include* the brain, but are certainly not contained within it, involving everything from the spinal cord and the peripheral nervous system to hormonal feedback loops, the immune system, and, ultimately, almost every organ in the body. Over time, all of these elements adapt in some degree to the particular demands placed upon them—and the brain grows to rely upon the specific characteristics that these external systems acquire. A brain transplant throws this complex interdependence into disarray—at least as badly as a massive stroke, or an extreme somatic trauma.

Sometimes, two or three years of extensive physiotherapy could enable the transplanted brain and body to adjust to each other—but only between clones of equal age and indistiguishable lifestyles. When the brain donor was a model of a likely human candidate—an intentionally overfed, under-exercised, drug-wrecked Extra, twenty or thirty years older than the body donor—the result was always death or coma.

The theoretical solution, if not the detailed means of achieving it, was obvious. Those portions of the brain responsible for motor control, the endocrine system, the low-level processing of sensory data, and so on, had to be retained in the body in which they had matured. Why struggle to make the donor brain adjust to the specifics of a new body, when that body's original brain already contained neural systems fine-tuned to perfection for the task? If the aim was to transplant memory and personality, why transplant anything else?

After many years of careful brain-function mapping, and the identification and synthesis of growth factors which could trigger mature neurons into sending forth axons across the boundaries of a graft, Gray's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

own team had been the first to try partial transplants. Gray watched tapes of the operations, and was both repelled and amused to see oddly shaped lumps of one Extra's brain being exchanged with the corresponding regions of another's; repelled by visceral instinct, but amused to see the seat of reason—even in a mere Extra—being treated like so much vegetable matter.

The forty-seventh partial transplant, between a sedentary, ailing fifty-year-old, and a fit, healthy twenty-year-old, was an unqualified success. After a mere two months of recuperation, both Extras were fully mobile, with all five senses completely unimpaired.

Had they swapped memories and "personalities"? Apparently, yes. Both had been observed by a team of psychologists for a year before the operation, and their behavior extensively characterized, and both had been trained to perform different sets of tasks for rewards. After the selective brain swap, the learned tasks, and the observed behavioral idiosyncrasies, were found to have followed the transplanted tissue. Of course, eventually the younger, fitter Extra began to be affected by its newfound health, becoming substantially more active than it had been in its original body—and the Extra now in the older body soon showed signs of acquiescing to its ill-health. But regardless of any post-transplant adaption to their new bodies, the fact remained that the Extras' identities—such as they were—had been exchanged.

After a few dozen more Extra-Extra transplants, with virtually identical outcomes, the time came for the first human-Extra trials.

Gray's parents had both died years before (on the operating table—an almost inevitable outcome of their hundreds of non-essential transplants), but they had left him a valuable legacy; thirty years ago, their own scientists had (illegally) signed up fifty men and women in their early twenties, and Extras had been made for them. These volunteers had been well paid, but not so well paid that a far larger sum, withheld until after the actual transplant, would lose its appeal. Nobody had been coerced, and the seventeen who'd dropped out quietly had not been punished. An eighteenth had tried blackmail—even though she'd had no idea who was doing the experiment, let alone who was financing it—and had died in a tragic ferry disaster, along with three hundred and nine other people. Gray's people believed in assassinations with a low signal-to-noise ratio.

Of the thirty-two human-Extra transplants, twenty-nine were pronounced completely successful. As with the Extra-Extra trials, both bodies were soon fully functional, but now the humans in the younger bodies could—after a month or two of speech therapy—respond to detailed interrogation by experts, who declared that their memories and personalities were intact.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gray wanted to speak to the volunteers in person, but knew that was too risky, so he contented himself with watching tapes of the interviews. The psychologists had their barrages of supposedly rigorous tests, but Gray preferred to listen to the less formal segments, when the volunteers spoke of their life histories, their political and religious beliefs, and so on—displaying at least as much consistency across the transplant as any person who is asked to discuss such matters on two separate occasions.

The three failures were difficult to characterize. They too learnt to use their new bodies, to walk and talk as proficiently as the others, but they were depressed, withdrawn, and uncooperative. No physical difference could be found—scans showed that their grafted tissue, and the residual portions of their Extra's brain, had forged just as many interconnecting pathways as the brains of the other volunteers. They seemed to be unhappy with a perfectly successful result—they seemed to have simply decided that they didn't *want* younger bodies, after all.

Gray was unconcerned; if these people were disposed to be ungrateful for their good fortune, that was a character defect that he knew he did not share. *He* would be utterly delighted to have a fresh young body to enjoy for a while—before setting out to wreck it, in the knowledge that, in a decade's time, he could take his pick from the next batch of Extras and start the whole process again.

There were "failures" amongst the Extras as well, but that was hardly surprising—the creatures had no way of even beginning to comprehend what had happened to them. Symptoms ranged from loss of appetite to extreme, uncontrollable violence; one Extra had even managed to batter itself to death on a concrete floor, before it could be tranquilized. Gray hoped his own Extra would turn out to be well-behaved—he wanted his old body to be clearly sub-human, but not utterly berserk—but it was not a critical factor, and he decided against diverting resources toward the problem. After all, it was the fate of *his* brain in the Extra's body that was absolutely crucial; success with the other half of the swap would be an entertaining bonus, but if it wasn't achieved, well, he could always revert to cremation.

Gray scheduled and canceled his transplant a dozen times. He was not in urgent need by any means—there was nothing currently wrong with him that required a single new organ, let alone an entire new body—but he desperately wanted to be *first*. The penniless volunteers didn't count—and that was why he hesitated: trials on humans from those lower social classes struck him as not much more reassuring than trials on Extras. Who was to say that a process that left a rough-hewn, culturally deficient personality intact, would preserve his own refined, complex sensibilities? Therein lay the dilemma: he would only feel safe if he knew

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that an equal—a rival—had undergone a transplant before him, in which case he would be deprived of all the glory of being a path-breaker. Vanity fought cowardice; it was a battle of titans.

It was the approach of Sarah Brash's court case that finally pushed him into making a decision. He didn't much care how the case itself went; the real battle would be for the best publicity; the media would determine who won and who lost, whatever the jury decided. As things stood, he looked like a naïve fool, an easily manipulated voyeur, while Sarah came across as a smart operator. She'd shown initiative; he'd just let himself (or rather, his Extra) get screwed. He needed an edge, he needed a gimmick—something that would overshadow her petty scheming. If he swapped bodies with an Extra in time for the trial—becoming, officially, the first human to do so—nobody would waste time covering the obscure details of Sarah's side of the case. His mere presence in court would be a matter of planet-wide controversy; the legal definition of identity was still based on DNA fingerprinting and retinal patterns, with some clumsy exceptions thrown in to allow for gene therapy and retina transplants. The laws would soon be changed—he was arranging it—but as things stood, the subpoena would apply to his old body. He could just imagine sitting in the public gallery, unrecognized, while Sarah's lawyer tried to cross-examine the quivering, confused, wild-eyed Extra that his discarded "corpse" had become! Quite possibly he, or his lawyers, would end up being charged with contempt of court, but it would be worth it for the spectacle.

So, Gray inspected Batch D, which were now just over nineteen years old. They regarded him with their usual idiotic, friendly expression. He wondered, not for the first time, if any of the Extras ever realized that *he* was their clone-brother, too. They never seemed to respond to him any differently than they did to other humans—and yet a fraction of a gram of fetal brain tissue was all that had kept him from being one of them. Even Batch A, his "contemporaries," showed no sign of recognition. If he had stripped naked and mimicked their grunting sounds, would they have accepted him as an equal? He'd never felt inclined to find out; Extra "anthropology" was hardly something he wished to encourage, let alone participate in. But he decided he would return to visit Batch D in his new body; it would certainly be amusing to see just what they made of a clone-brother who vanished, then came back three months later with speech and clothes.

The clones were all in perfect health, and virtually indistinguishable. He finally chose one at random. The trainer examined the tattoo on the sole of its foot, and said, "D12, sir."

Gray nodded, and walked away.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He spent the week before the transplant in a state of constant agitation. He knew exactly which drugs would have prevented this, but the medical team had advised him to stay clean, and he was too afraid to disobey them.

He watched D12 for hours, trying to distract himself with the supposedly thrilling knowledge that those clear eyes, that smooth skin, those taut muscles, would soon be his. The only trouble was, this began to seem a rather paltry reward for the risk he would be taking. Knowing all his life that this day would come, he'd learnt not to care at all what he looked like; by now, he was so used to his own appearance that he wasn't sure he especially *wanted* to be lean and muscular and rosy-cheeked. After all, if that really had been his fondest wish, he could have achieved it in other ways; some quite effective pharmaceuticals and tailored viruses had existed for decades, but he had chosen not to use them. He had *enjoyed* looking the part of the dissolute billionaire, and his wealth had brought him more sexual partners than his new body would ever attract through its own merits. In short, he neither wanted nor needed to change his appearance at all.

So, in the end it came down to longevity, and the hope of immortality. As his parents had proved, any transplant involved a small but finite risk. A whole new body every ten or twenty years was surely a far safer bet than replacing individual organs at an increasing rate, for diminishing returns. And a whole new body *now*, long before he needed it, made far more sense than waiting until he was so frail that a small overdose of anaesthetic could finish him off.

When the day arrived, Gray thought he was, finally, prepared. The chief surgeon asked him if he wished to proceed; he could have said no, and she would not have blinked—not one of his employees would have dared to betray the least irritation, had he canceled their laborious preparations a thousand times.

But he didn't say no.

As the cool spray of the anaesthetic touched his skin, he suffered a moment of absolute panic. *They were going to cut up his brain.* Not the brain of a grunting, drooling Extra, not the brain of some ignorant slum-dweller, but *his* brain, full of memories of great music and literature and art, full of moments of joy and insight from the finest psychotropic drugs, full of ambitions that, given time, might change the course of civilization.

He tried to visualize one of his favorite paintings, to provide an image he could dwell upon, a memory that would prove that the essential Daniel Gray had survived the transplant. *That Van Gogh he'd bought last year.* But he couldn't recall the name of it, let alone what it looked like. He closed his eyes and drifted helplessly into darkness.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When he awoke, he was numb all over, and unable to move or make a sound, but he *could* see. Poorly, at first, but over a period that might have been hours, or might have been days—punctuated as it was with stretches of enervating, dreamless sleep—he was able to identify his surroundings. A white ceiling, a white wall, a glimpse of some kind of electronic device in the corner of one eye; the upper section of the bed must have been tilted, mercifully keeping his gaze from being strictly vertical. But he couldn't move his head, or his eyes, he couldn't even close his eyelids, so he quickly lost interest in the view. The light never seemed to change, so sleep was his only relief from the monotony. After a while, he began to wonder if in fact he had woken many times, before he had been able to see, but had experienced nothing to mark the occasions in his memory.

Later he could hear, too, although there wasn't much to be heard; people came and went, and spoke softly, but not, so far as he could tell, to him; in any case, their words made no sense. He was too lethargic to care about the people, or to fret about his situation. In time he would be taught to use his new body fully, but if the experts wanted him to rest right now, he was happy to oblige.

When the physiotherapists first set to work, he felt utterly helpless and humiliated. They made his limbs twitch with electrodes, while *he* had no control, no say at all in what his body did. Eventually, he began to receive sensations from his limbs, and he could at least *feel* what was going on, but since his head just lolled there, he couldn't watch what they were doing to him, and they made no effort to explain anything. Perhaps they thought he was still deaf and blind, perhaps his sight and hearing at this early stage were freak effects that had not been envisaged. Before the operation, the schedule for his recovery had been explained to him in great detail, but his memory of it was hazy now. He told himself to be patient.

When, at last, one arm came under his control, he raised it, with great effort, into his field of view.

It was his arm, his *old* arm—not the Extra's.

He tried to emit a wail of despair, but nothing came out.

Something must have gone wrong, late in the operation, forcing them to cancel the transplant *after* they had cut up his brain. Perhaps the Extra's life-support machine had failed; it seemed unbelievable, but it wasn't impossible—as his parents' deaths had proved, there was always a risk. He suddenly felt unbearably tired. He now faced the prospect of spending months merely to regain the use of his very own body; for all he knew, the newly forged pathways across the wounds in his brain might require as much time to become completely functional as they would have if the transplant had gone ahead.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For several days, he was angry and depressed. He tried to express his rage to the nurses and physiotherapists, but all he could do was twitch and grimace—he couldn't speak, he couldn't even gesture—and they paid no attention. How could his people have been so incompetent? How could they put him through months of trauma and humiliation, with nothing to look forward to but ending up exactly where he'd started?

But when he'd calmed down, he told himself that his doctors weren't incompetent at all; in fact, he knew they were the best in the world. Whatever had gone wrong must have been completely beyond their control. He decided to adopt a positive attitude to the situation; after all, he was lucky: the malfunction might have killed *him*, instead of the Extra. He was alive, he was in the care of experts, and what was three months in bed to the immortal he would still, eventually, become? This failure would make his ultimate success all the more of a triumph—personally, he could have done without the setback, but the media would lap it up.

The physiotherapy continued. His sense of touch, and then his motor control, was restored to more and more of his body, until, although weak and uncoordinated, he felt without a doubt that this body was *his*. To experience familiar aches and twinges was a relief, more than a disappointment, and several times he found himself close to tears, overcome with mawkish sentiment at the joy of regaining what he had lost, imperfect as it was. On these occasions, he swore he would never try the transplant again; he would be faithful to his own body, in sickness and in health. Only by methodically reminding himself of all his reasons for proceeding in the first place could he put this foolishness aside.

Once he had control of the muscles of his vocal cords, he began to grow impatient for the speech therapists to start work. His hearing, as such, seemed to be fine, but he could still make no sense of the words of the people around him, and he could only assume that the connections between the parts of his brain responsible for understanding speech, and the parts which carried out the lower-level processing of sound, were yet to be refined by whatever ingenious regime the neurologists had devised. He only wished they'd start soon; he was sick of this isolation.

One day, he had a visitor—the first person he'd seen since the operation who was not a health professional clad in white. The visitor was a young man, dressed in brightly colored pajamas, and traveling in a wheelchair.

By now, Gray could turn his head. He watched the young man approaching, surrounded by a retinue of obsequious doctors. Gray recognized the doctors; every member of the transplant team was there, and they were all smiling proudly, and nodding ceaselessly. Gray wondered why they had taken so long to appear; until now, he'd presumed that they were waiting until he was able to fully comprehend the explanation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of their failure, but he suddenly realized how absurd that was—how could they have left him to make his own guesses? It was outrageous! It was true that speech, and no doubt writing too, meant nothing to him, but surely they could have devised some method of communication! And why did they look so pleased, when they ought to have been abject?

Then Gray realized that the man in the wheelchair was the Extra, D12. *And yet he spoke.* And when he spoke, the doctors shook with sycophantic laughter.

The Extra brought the wheelchair right up to the bed, and spent several seconds staring into Gray's face. Gray stared back; obviously he was dreaming, or hallucinating. The Extra's expression hovered between boredom and mild amusement, just as it had in the dream he'd had all those years ago.

The Extra turned to go. Gray felt a convulsion pass through his body. Of course he was dreaming. What other explanation could there be?

Unless the transplant *had* gone ahead, after all.

Unless the remnants of his brain in this body retained enough of his memory and personality to make him believe that he, too, was Daniel Gray. Unless the brain function studies that had localized identity had been correct, but incomplete—unless the processes that constituted human self-awareness were redundantly duplicated in the most primitive parts of the brain.

In which case, there were now two Daniel Grays.

One had everything: The power of speech. Money. Influence. Ten thousand servants. And now, at last, immaculate health.

And the other? He had one thing only.

The knowledge of his helplessness.

It was, he had to admit, a glorious afternoon. The sky was cloudless, the air was warm, and the clipped grass beneath his feet was soft but dry.

He had given up trying to communicate his plight to the people around him. He knew he would never master speech, and he couldn't even manage to convey meaning in his gestures—the necessary modes of thought were simply no longer available to him, and he could no more plan and execute a simple piece of mime than he could solve the latest problems in grand unified field theory. For a while he had simply thrown tantrums—refusing to eat, refusing to cooperate. Then he had recalled his own plans for his old body, in the event of such recalcitrance. *Cremation.* And realized that, in spite of everything, he didn't want to die.

He acknowledged, vaguely, that in a sense he really wasn't Daniel Gray, but a new person entirely, a composite of Gray and the Extra D12—but this was no comfort to him, whoever, whatever, he was. All

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his memories told him he was Daniel Gray; he had none from the life of D12, in an ironic confirmation of his long-held belief in human superiority over Extras. Should he be happy that he'd also proved—if there'd ever been any doubt—that human consciousness was the most physical of things, a spongy gray mess that could be cut up like a starfish, and survive in two separate parts? Should he be happy that the other Daniel Gray—without a doubt, the more complete Daniel Gray—had achieved his lifelong ambition?

The trainer yanked on his collar.

Meekly, he stepped onto the path.

The lush garden was crowded as never before—this was indeed the party of the decade—and as he came into sight, the guests began to applaud, and even to cheer.

He might have raised his arms in acknowledgment, but the thought did not occur to him. ●

THE AFTERSET

Sunset, science says, is light's refraction;
reds and purples that drive us to distraction,
the simple interaction of volcanic dust
the thinning atmosphere, and the imagination.

We can make better now ourselves,

design on software's infinite palette
colors Nature never knew,
to suit ourselves, or set
mathematical permutations to define
the fractal's inward winding wheel that shades
pixel upon pixel
the radiant grandeur
of an unpolluted atmosphere
as prism for an unblemished sun.

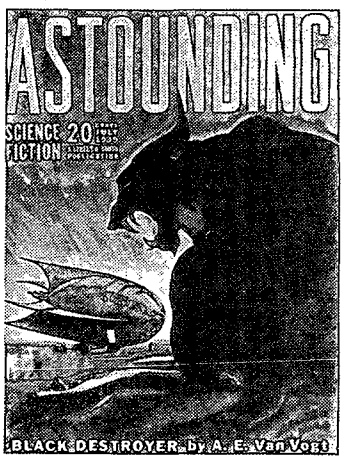
We can, if we have whims, have streak,
more lifelike than the bird itself,
a tern curving inland across the deepest crimson,
or, bright as Venus rising where the night
slants slowly up the amethyst,
the first interstellar ship
starbursting out of hyperdrive
to land here.

—William John Watkins

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A TREASURE FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION!

A Hardbound Copy of the July 1939 Edition of ASTOUNDING!



Critics mark this issue as the first "great" issue edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. It contains the first published story, "Black Destroyer," by A.E. van Vogt and the first story by Isaac Asimov to be published in ASTOUNDING.

This hardbound facsimile of the July 1939 issue also contains an Epilogue in which A.E. van Vogt, Asimov, and Rocklynne comment on their own work, their feelings towards ASTOUNDING, and especially their relationships with John W. Campbell, Jr.

This classic collector's item is now only $9.95 but act fast, supply is limited. Please send my 1939 ASTOUNDING to:

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Send check or money order (No COD's) to: Analog, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462
Canadian or Foreign orders add $5.00. Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery. MPIA-0

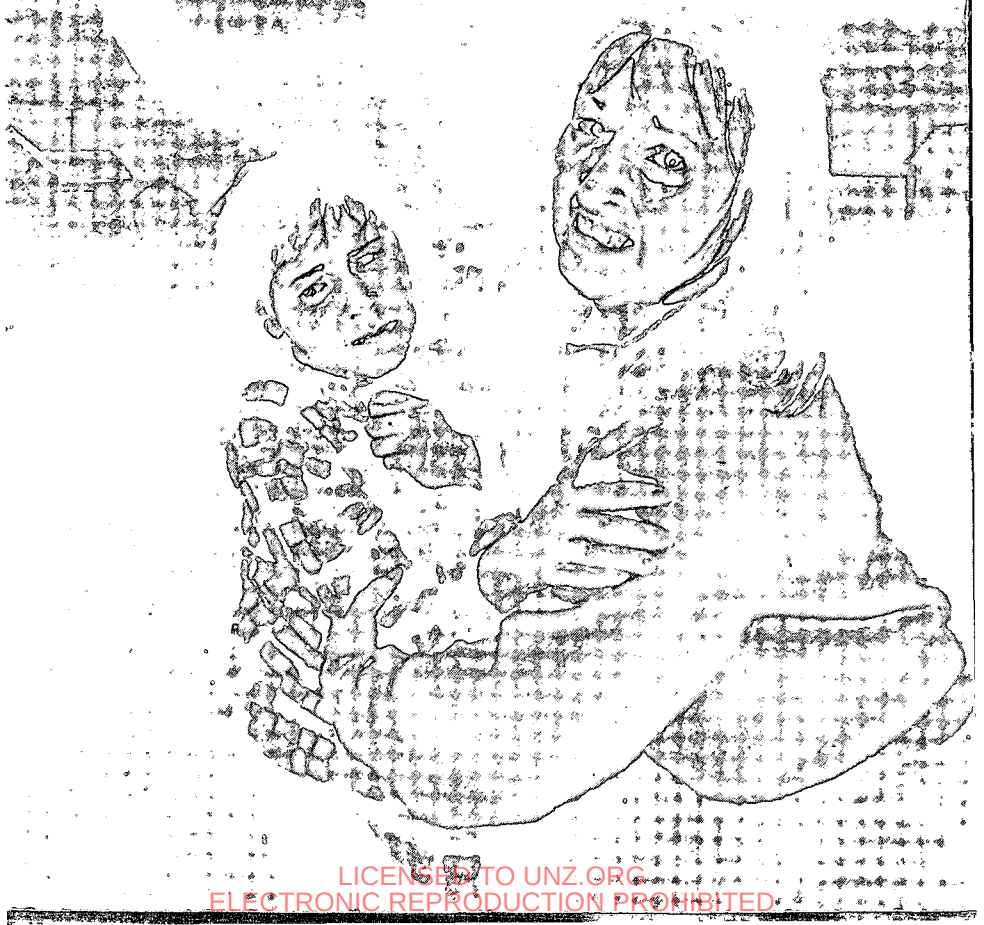
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rebecca Ore

OCEAN HAMMER

Tor Books has published four of the author's novels, including her latest—*The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid.* Her short fiction has appeared in *Amazing Stories* and *Isaac's Universe III.* "Ocean Hammer" is her first story for *Asimov's.*

art: Steve Cavallo



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My only neighbor Sandy seemed to be another ex-madwoman. She painted. I bred dogs and house-sat. We both weren't the kind of people people who could winter in the Islands. I didn't have the emotional durability for tropical diseases and politics, or the money. Instead, I planned to stay safe among live oaks and chlorinated water from November to March, in a small ocean town in South Carolina.

Few people lived on the beach in winter. We had one year-round store, across the causeway by the post office. A restaurant at the crossroads of Rte. 17 and the road to the ocean stayed open, the back rooms locked off, the key to the community library hanging on a hook by the cash register. Most of those who ran tourist facilities in the summer turned into serious recluses by fall, recovering from fake hospitality overdoses. The restaurant owner said, after I'd been there a week, "You're Irene with the dogs, aren't you? It's weird anyone would want to be isolated out on the winter beach."

But for me, chilly sand was pleasantly disconcerting. I hadn't felt social lately, anxious for subliminal reasons, if such vague feelings could be called reasons. Hurricane? I turned on the news after I scraped the leftovers out for the crabs. Between Cuba and Africa, a baby storm wobbled under the satellites, building spin.

Last year in Maine, I sat out a northeaster, power out, the water in sheets across the road, then through a freeze that turned the water into unwanted ice rinks. I figured I could manage a hurricane.

The next afternoon after the storm began forming, I let my terriers loose and began walking on the beach. About three houses up, Sandy, a woman of forty who looked about twenty-five, grew winter vegetables in pots on her deck. The youthful illusion stemmed from her weight, the moistness of the skin, perhaps from some essential immaturity, but she wouldn't have seemed a happy twenty-five. I didn't know whether I should speak or not when I saw her with her watering can, bent over earnestly. Her husband let her get away to the beach cottage for painting time now that her children were married. She'd seemed drugged the first day I met her, then okay but remote the next time we spoke, the only two human bodies walking on the beach. I wondered about those children, and that husband.

She had her painting. I had my dogs and my own prescriptions—the valium, the codeine for the wisdom tooth that had been extracted three years earlier, the thorazine I'd gotten when some psychiatrist thought that my hysterics over getting old without having had any real life signified schizophrenia. Another therapist, who told me I couldn't let myself escape *that* simply, forced me off the major tranks, and canceled my Social Security disability. Being a loser was so much less romantic than being schiz.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I kept the thorazine in case I ever wanted to do acid. When I owned land and all my iris beds were finished, I'd trip again. Until I had all my dream irises, I believed in logic and a certain moral code that more reduced stress than really made me feel good about myself.

My dogs dashed in and out of the surf. I decided to say, "Hello," to Sandy's back that looked almost like a plywood yard cut-out of a woman bending over, ass to the road. Ass to the ocean.

She turned, the hose still running, and said, "Irene? You haven't been by lately. I wondered about you."

"I've been busy." Watching dogs fuck so that I could vouch for the pedigrees. If I weren't breeding show Border Terriers, I'd confess to a blue collar job. Wiping up after dogs. Feeding dogs. Giving dogs and puppies their pills and shots. Selling dogs.

Yet the routine with the dogs kept me sane. Well, since some doubted that I'd ever *been* insane, let's just say that it kept me focused. And since they were small dogs, and not so obviously purebreds, I could travel with them easily. Twenty thousand dollars in brood stock and inventory yelped around other people's houses, houses that I cared for out of season. I owned a trailer that friends let me set up on their land, in case I fell between caretaker gigs.

"Well, *I've* been busy, too," she said. "Would you want some bok choy?"

Do I? Am I that hungry? I'd brought a hundred pounds of frozen produce with me that I'd put up when I took care of a small farm in Albany, Georgia, that summer, but why not get involved? Or was I gay? Or was she gay? If we'd been simple rednecks, we wouldn't have to worry about this.

Realizing that my hesitation verged on the ridiculous, I said, "Yes," and went up the sea-bleached steps to her deck. The dogs decided among themselves that I wasn't going to disappear out the front of the house, and continued to chase terns down the beach, terns that darted away over the water when they had the dogs excited enough.

Sandy didn't just clip me bok choy and send me on my way, though. She said, "Can I get you some tea? Soda? Coffee." She pushed her hair back even though it was short.

I said, "Soda's fine," thinking that would be quickest. While she was in the house, I looked at the plants on the deck, then flipped through her sketch pad, nothing really great, nothing too terrible, therefore, someone not completely deluded about having a talent. The more pathetic, actually, for *being* talented, but maybe too tentative to really work at it, or starting too late.

"What do you know about the Grey Man?" she said, coming back with two canned generic colas. Her voice seemed strained. I noticed a long scar that masked the central blue vein in her left wrist.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nuts, I thought. The Grey Man, our local ghost, signals death or hurricanes. "I can't believe in ghosts," I said. "I might have to go back on major tranquilizers."

"If you saw him, you'd think you were crazy?" She seemed to find this a puzzling concept. "Would you think anyone *else* who saw him was crazy?"

"Did you see him?" Find out quickly, then avoid her if she had. I knew she used pills. Maybe they hadn't quite gotten her meds balanced the day I noticed that she was stoned?

"No. I've just heard about him." She looked down at her cola can and rubbed a finger around the rim. Denial? "It made me realize I'd been an outsider here all these years. Nobody told me about the ghost before."

I was about to say, *he's in the local Chamber of Commerce tourist booklets,* but realized that she was a person who refused to think of herself as a tourist. "I don't think they like to talk about him. Sort of like speaking his name will draw him." I'd read about him in the tourist brochure myself, but then I can't stand the stress of a rigidly maintained self-image.

"A man who collects my garbage told me about him," Sandy said.

"Be careful about garbage men here," I said. "They aren't like garbage men where there are lots of good jobs."

"He *is* smarter than city garbage men," she said. "I enjoy talking to him. Sometimes, I'm lonely here."

I realized that she'd never stop to think that those extra I.Q. points might mean he'd be prone to resent her. Then I wondered if she were so lonely that she stood around her trashcans on pick-up days, waiting for conversation. "How did you come about to talk to your garbage man?"

"He said hello at the store," she said. "Then I asked him if he'd model for me—clothed, not naked," she continued, and I knew which garbage man she must be talking about. "He's been telling me stories while I work."

"Dubois?" I asked.

"How did you know?"

"Well, it's the way he is," I said. Dubois ran a little night pavilion with two rides, one a roller coaster, the other a whirligig, during summer. Dubois was a known tourist flirt, and familiar with the joys of scaring others. "He likes to scare tourists. You can't take him too seriously."

"Why? Because he's not educated? Because he works as a garbage man?" Her tone implied I was a bigot.

"No, because he especially speeds up the machines for cute girls, to scare them. I heard about him from the people whose house I'm sitting."

"I'm *forty,*" she said, as if she'd never guessed how much she looked like a plump twenty-five.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And it's not tourist season," I pointed out. My oldest bitch came up and lay down at my feet, as though ready to spend the day. I decided that I should leave before my other dogs joined us. "Sorry, I shouldn't be so critical. I'll be back, but now I've got to get the dogs home and rinsed off before the salt ruins their coats. We leave for a show Friday."

"Do you want the bok choy?" she asked. Offering it earlier had just been a pretense to get me on the porch. Did local gossip have me so poor that bok choy would seem an appropriate lure? What did she really want to talk about?

"Just enough for a stir fry tonight," I said, standing up. The old dog looked up at me, then sighed and got to her feet. The other dogs looked up at us, then waited at the bottom of the stairs. Sandy went inside and came back out with bok choy stems she must have cut a day or two before.

"Thanks," I said, knowing I'd have to eat them tonight.

"I cut too many yesterday," she said, "but I could have composted them." The tone was, *And thank you for condescending to me, too, but I'm too lonely to resent it overly much.*

"Call me if you want to chat," I said, and was downstairs before I realized that the phone wasn't listed in my name or the name outside on the sign. I took the bok choy, and then remembered that I had turkey thighs in the freezer, not mine. Perhaps not good, either, but they wouldn't keep to next year, regardless.

As I reached the sand, she called down, "Do you dare to see a ghost?"

Challenging? Teasing? "No," I said, remembering the diagnosis from the hospital I'd landed in while hitchhiking through the Catskills. While it had been voided later by the therapist who took me off welfare and Thorazine, I'd believed at the time that I was paranoid schizophrenic. It's an odd thing to have to be argued into trusting that you're not *that* crazy. I couldn't dare see ghosts.

She said, "I'd prefer not to, too, but I feel a presence." Don't threaten *me* with your ghosts, lady, I thought. I'd built my neat logical walls and lived carefully in other people's homes. My closest friends were people I saw at dog shows, handlers whose clients needed people to babysit orchids or electronic equipment. The only sign of how I'd used to be were my fearless fierce terriers.

Back home, I put the dogs in their portable chain link kennels and took the bok choy upstairs. The turkey thighs seemed freezer-burned, but edible.

The whole meal, when I ate it, seemed slightly stale.

A day or two later, I ran into Dubois in the store across the causeway on Route 17. He was a tall man with seamed skin and scarred hands. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nodded stonily, black lock of hair falling, as if Sandy had told him about my mistrust of him.

I said, "So you've told my neighbor about the Grey Man?"

"Yeah," he said. "Told her. He's going to tell her whether to leave or not come a hurricane. You the dog woman. Taking care of that house for the winter?"

"You live inland, don't you?" I said, figuring it all out. "You'll save her from the storms?"

"Sure do live inland. Only a fool would live on the beach during storm season." He grinned, one incisor so white I knew that it was false, and only wondered why he either didn't have the color better matched to his original bluish teeth or go ahead and get a stainless steel peg.

I said, "Well, I heard you like to scare people. That woman's pretty fragile, it seems to me."

He turned red around the ears. I didn't know whether he was embarrassed or angry, but I bought my toilet paper and dog food and left.

The storm began moving the day I drove to the show. I pulled into the fairground lot and parked, the dogs in their crates jumping up and down. They were so excited to be shown—all except for the import British bitch, who seemed to suspect that this business had cost her earlier owners. She watched quietly as I set up the tent poles and unfurled the awning.

So far, the only people here were the professional handlers from too far away to go home between weekend shows: McGilray and his new lover, who'd apprenticed with him and had just got her license; the Hollands in their new motor home, gutted for crates and folded grooming tables; Julie Cram, the aging Lesbian from Atlanta with the Briards, Samoyeds, and Huskies; Forceman, who'd offered to take me on as an apprentice.

Even though the American Kennel Club often sent spies around to check, Forceman and Julie were drinking, Julie with the liquor in a bottle of milk, Forceman more obviously out of a canteen. Both had been suspended for six weeks a few years ago—someone must have informed, which is unusual in our business. But when the handlers know who's who, they do drink and such more than the AKC would like.

I was here early because I didn't want to walk by Sandy's without speaking another day, and I couldn't stand to see my own self mirrored in her desperateness. I got the crates out of the van and under the awning before I went to find the kibble people. The kibble people give out free samples during shows. I'd come early also to cut expenses.

Forceman looked up at me and said, "You've got the points. I've got the dog to take them."

Yeah, well, I don't win much against the pros, but if the pros don't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bring rival Borders, I enter enough Borders to make my own champions. A minor breed—one point per dog beaten up to five points, three to five points to a major, two majors under different judges and a total of fifteen points and I've made another champion. I told Forceman, "I've got a bitch you haven't seen yet," but I suspected that Forceman's client would be more likely to win with her than I'd be. Poor bitch, more new owners.

"Saw her in England. Type's a bit outdated. This judge likes the cobby ones."

Maybe tropical politics *wouldn't* be worse? "And where are the kibble people?" I asked Forceman.

"Other end of the show hall. Show hall's a mess. They just finished a county fair."

"Thanks," I said. I'd have gone back for my hand truck, but I'd have been too embarrassed.

Forceman's Border client, a leathery woman in a pink silk dress, came up then, and said, "Irene, so glad you could make it. I'm looking for some pet-quality puppies for friends, and all ours are promised."

And that's why I lugged around a big crate full of four-month-old pups. I said, "I've got some at three hundred dollars each. Let me get some kibble and I'll be back."

She took five. I couldn't ask what she'd get for them. Just another dog show, business, some almost ribbons, and the bitch did come in Best of Opposite Sex. Forceman's dog took a Group Placement, I heard, but I wasn't there. Sunday morning, I'd heard on a radio playing next to a man grooming a standard poodle that the storm was headed for the South Carolina coast.

My duty was to save the place from looters, in case of civil disturbance—say, invading hordes from Charleston or Myrtle Beach—or hurricane. To board it up, if possible, before the weather hit.

I had enough money to put the dogs in a kennel for the duration, and did, all except for the British bitch, who needed reassurance, then I drove through the dark to the house. The highway patrol cruised by twice, still no rain, no evacuation notice.

The British bitch shivered, then looked at me with those huge out-of-fashion eyes. She was Deerstone lineage, leggy, deep-chested curved to a thin loin, a small dog built to hound lines, but the head still broad-nosed, flat across the skull. I thought that she was a beautiful dog, present fashions notwithstanding, but I'd never given her a kennel name because I knew I'd sell her as soon as she had her American championship. I'd bought her before she finished her British championship and paid for her to stay until she did. She was a three-thousand dollar investment.

Now I wondered if I should have boarded her, too. "Don't make me feel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guilty," I said to her as I turned on the television. CNN satellites followed the storm every half hour. It veered north, slowed, and wobbled again.

It was huge. No *way* it would miss anything in South Carolina.

Something began screaming. Sandy? Not the wind, though it was raining now.

And on the beach, I saw something bigger than a man, walking. It's Dubois, trying to frighten us, I thought. The Deerstone bitch looked at me, then out. Her hackles rose. Borders are more like hounds as puppies than terriers, timid until a year has passed. Then the world divides into things to love and things to attack.

She hit the beach bristled and growling. I heard Sandy screaming again.

And there came grey walking, grey space, nothing inside it. No, I will not go insane, I told myself, it's the stress, the storm. The Grey Man got between me and the house.

"Go away," I told it—whatever it was, something from inside my head or something illogical but real. "Go!" And it *looked* at me, deep grey, deep grey walking from an impossible distance, from both ways into the middle.

The bitch howled.

And whatever it was, I *amused* it, and that made me angry enough to run right through it, sanity—or my stupid concept of sanity—be damned. The bitch followed me inside the house.

And the wind blew inland. *Crazy! Crazy!* the wind was saying. I huddled on the couch, and heard the highway patrol out on the road advising us to evacuate. I wouldn't do it. I *couldn't* do it. There was no ghost, I knew that. I was insane, and I couldn't let people see me like this.

The patrol car went on, bull horn broadcasting the evacuation orders. I turned out my lights and wondered if they'd come and drag me away. I couldn't *afford* to see a ghost. It was contraindicated, along with New Age parapsychology and voodoo or Santeria spirit possession, for someone with my past.

The bitch came up and leaned against my knee, afraid of nothing, not even the Grey Man. I said, "Maybe it's just . . ." After I'd believed that I was schizophrenic, even after someone else, later, lifted the diagnosis and the drugs, I could never trust myself again.

We sat in the dark with an invisible ghost. I felt calmer, and realized that I should close the storm shutters and leave. I went out in the rain and wrestled the shutters closed in the front.

A sticky shutter latch slipped down into its catch just after I gave up on it. What *were* you? I wondered. The grey absorbed the rain glitter. We still had street lights.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I like to scare people. Like Dubois. Thought insertion. Psychosis. Great, now I was hearing voices inside my head. *You two are perfect.*

The bitch growled. I realized that whatever was going on, something real enough was bothering her. Did my going crazy bother her?

Then I saw Sandy on her deck, holding a kerosene lamp. The ghost moved toward her, grey against the yellow light. She either didn't see him or was paralyzed by the sight.

Someone like Dubois? I finished shuttering the house and felt my way to the kitchen sink, reached under it, and got the battery lantern. Its glare seemed to firm up my thoughts. Yeah, ghost-like-Dubois, I've never heard you could actually *do* anything.

He closed the shutter. Maybe.

I decided not to think about that, and went out with the lantern and the little bitch. The ghost was circling Sandy. She turned with it as if hypnotized, the kerosene lantern in her hand swaying.

"Sandy."

"It's the Grey Man, isn't it? I'm waiting for Dubois. He's going to save me."

Or we've both gone batty, I thought, but I said, "We need to leave."

"My car won't start. Dubois will come looking for me."

"Shit, I've got the van. Come *on.*"

"You see the ghost, too, don't you? But what does *that* prove?" The ghost laughed inside my mind. The little bitch growled again, then barked. "And I can't leave my paintings."

"Not good enough to make you a living yet, I imagine. And certainly not good enough to die for."

"Everyone says that. Why don't I just stay here? Dubois said he'd come check on me before the storm hit."

"Sandy." *Now,* woman, isn't the time for giving in to major life-inadequacy anxieties. *Nor* is it a good time to trust a man who likes to frighten women. "Can't you go back to Raleigh?"

Why not give in, the ghost inserted. *You're both tremendously inadequate.*

Sandy said, "I might surprise my husband."

I thought to the ghost, *But we're alive, asshole, and you're still dead.* "Get what you can and put it in my house. Shit, Sandy, you don't even have shutters!"

"My husband nailed up plywood the winter I didn't come here."

I went inside and played instant art critic, snatching up a few canvases, and then the wind picked up and the street lights went out. I heard a crash. Sandy's kerosene lantern dripped flames across the deck and down between the boards to the sand under it. The bitch and the ghost were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

circling and charging each other, the bitch silent except for her teeth snapping.

Crazy ladies. How do you know you're not hallucinating the dog?

Because visual hallucinations are phenomenally rare, I told the Grey Man, grabbing Sandy and dragging her out of the fire spreading around her.

The Grey Man came up, through us, a chill with hurricane winds whining. Sandy said, "I thought Dubois would come get me before this."

I heaved at her. She twisted and pulled against me. At least I got her clear of the fire. Rain hissed against the kerosene. Not that dangerous. Kerosene doesn't explode, cools below its burning point easily, needs a wick to evaporate and burn. Nice mind to be so rational at a time like this, I realized.

I ran for my van. A man slammed the hood down and ran. No ghost. I flashed the light on him. Dubois turned his head and grinned, then ran faster as the bitch chased him, eager to draw corporal blood after snapping on ecotoplasm.

He'd crippled Sandy's car first, I realized. The bitch scored an ankle. He yelled and kicked at her, but she dodged, went in again. He lifted his leg, but not to kick. She'd at least nicked the tendon. A Border terrier can decapitate a rat. I went back to the house, found a butcher knife, and went out to help her.

He limped. The ghost swirled around him. The bitch grinned bloody teeth at me. "So you like hurricanes and crazy ladies, Mr. Dubois?"

"Your dog attacked me for no reason. I'm going to sue you for whatever you have, you stupid bitch!"

"I saw you disable my car."

"You lie. Everyone knows you're just a drifter. Folks *know* me. Sheriff's kin to me. I come to help you."

I wondered if he could get to his car. He began to come at me, saw the knife, hobbled a bit, indecisively, and looked at the ghost, as if they knew each other quite well. Another kinsman, perhaps.

"Let's go," I said to the dog. "Someone will help him to his car. Or the highway patrol will come back by—checking." I spoke to him more than the dog, to myself more than to either. The ghost waved windy grey arms at me.

Sand stung my skin, then twigs hit me. I wondered what the ghost could lift. If it was something big enough to kill me, I was dead. But I wasn't going to bring Dubois, crippled or not, inside my house. The bitch walked behind me, her low growls muffled half the time by the wind.

Sandy. The house wasn't burning. 10:30. I knew the storm would reach its peak in fifteen minutes to an hour. Maybe I could reason with her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now? When I opened her door, it caught the wind and banged against the house.

I thought I heard a shot, and called ahead, "Sandy, it's Irene! Don't shoot, please." No answer, so I looked for her.

She was lying on her back inside the house, in bed with a pistol. Few women, but lots of teenaged girls, use firearms. I checked. She'd shot herself through the jaw, angled into the lower skull, the brain stem.

"Oh, God, woman, did you think I was the ghost again?" And had she meant it? The scar on her wrist was over a vein, not an artery. If she'd had her gun in bed with her, she could have been so terrified that the banging door might have made her jerk on the trigger.

And to leave me with such ambiguity. The phones were dead. "Oh, man," I said, out loud. I left her and went back to my house.

Dubois was on the deck, glassy-eyed. The bitch looked at him as if waiting for blood loss to turn him into raw meat. "Sandy's dead. She had an accident with a gun."

Then I realized that I'd left the gun by her body, and the house unlocked. Dubois said, "Your dog crippled me. Just let me in, please. I'll tell you where my car is."

So Dubois liked to scare women—still, could I leave him out in the storm? Especially free to get Sandy's gun? I let him inside, bolted the doors after us, kept the knife up as I threw him a roll of adhesive tape and gauze. The terrier lay down, rested her head on her crossed front paws, and watched him.

"Damn small dog to be so mean."

"Damn mean man, to strand women in a hurricane."

"I'd have come back and drove you off."

"The ghost kin of yours?"

"Nice hysterical women. One bought off by her husband, sent away and feeling she was so helpless without his money she couldn't go through a divorce. One a drifter. A looney."

Yes, the ghost thought to me. I said, "I'm not a drifter. I'm not hysterical. I'm *maybe* psychotic. Dog wants to eat you, and I've got a freezer."

He began sweating, but he didn't whine. I could see him thinking about Sandy's gun, maybe live bullets beside her dead body.

The wind drowned all other sounds. Our voices failed to leave our mouths. The house began moving, a deep thrum more than a sound. Dubois looked up. I moved a heavy table and sat cross-legged under it with my bitch and my knife. I slanted my head to get it to fit and watched Dubois.

The house imploded. Twisters, the eye of the storm, whatever. I'd sealed the house.

The hurricane walked through the ruins. Rain battered the table. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

foundations shifted. I scuttled out and ran to the street side, then slid down a piling, climbed into the van with the dog. The house washed over us. The van windshield shattered. I put the bitch in my heaviest show crate and sat beside her in the back.

Dubois had to be dead, or getting Sandy's gun.

Oh, man, how will I explain *this?* And did he really disable the truck? I had spare keys in one of the crates, and went back to get them.

The engine turned over just fine. We were pinned by a telephone pole. I doubted that I could cut my way out with a butcher knife, or drive through the storm with the windshield out.

Then *two* ghosts struck. Dubois and the old one. I screamed back at them, "I can eat, I can fuck, I can feel the ocean, I enjoy smells, I'm *better* than you, I can go anywhere I want to, I don't give a *damn,* and I'm just *not crazy!*", screamed it over and over as they pelted me with stones, shells, and glass grains from the windshield.

I fainted screaming, and woke up to find the sun shining through the broken windshield and a South Carolina state trooper looking down at me.

"You all cut up," he said.

"Wind did it," I said, feeling my nose, which had a gash through one nostril. I was too dazed to hurt. "Dubois? He got stranded and I let him in."

"Dead."

I knew that. "Three houses down? I went over and she'd shot herself." Better say it than have them think you did it.

"Woman had a history. Psychiatric. Maybe the storm drove her crazy?"

"Maybe it was an accident? Stuff banging around. She couldn't get her car started."

"Dubois would have come for you."

I wondered for a hideous moment if Dubois had been guiltless, or at least less guilty than I'd imagined. Paranoid again. Then I heard the bitch in the crate in the rear. After trying to sit up—I couldn't, really—I said, "Could you get my dog out, please? She's very valuable."

After he did she licked my nose. It hurt. "Dubois always rescue people from hurricanes?" I asked.

The trooper, not a Tidewater man, looked away a bit, then said, "Sometimes people disappear in storms."

Well, we'd never know how *we'd* have come through Dubois's rescue, would we? Other people came up. "Bridge didn't hold, so we'll take you out by boat."

Through the wreckage, the ocean now looked innocent. I let the men help me out and lay me down on the stretcher. The trooper asked, "You got any people we should call?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not for years, I thought, and wondered why not. *I'm alive. I can taste food. I can remember that kerosene has a very high flash point. I can feel pleasure. I've gotten a second opinion, mine, and I've never been as crazy as I wanted to be to excuse my life.* The ghosts were temporary, insanity or not. I said, "I don't have insurance."

Yeah, that sounded a little crazy. I smiled and said, "Call the Zanes and tell them the Grey Man got their house."

On the boat, the medic looked me over and said, "We'd probably let you go after we sew you up and watch you for a night, but if you can't remember getting hit by anything big, then maybe I could just take you by your doctor's office."

I realized that all my summer-grown food was gone, that I'd lost the money I'd gotten from the pups, and needed to get the van fixed before I could get my other dogs out of the kennel. "Is there going to be any disaster relief?"

"Don't worry about money right now."

"I've got dogs boarded inland, and all my cash was in the house."

"Maybe we'll find it. If you don't have a local doctor, I know a good one. You can pay later."

After the doctor stitched my nose and cleaned the cuts, I went to the high school where I *should* have gone the night before. I phoned until I found friends willing to come take me in for a while, loan me money to pay off the boarding bills.

After I got off the phone, I was leaning against the wall by the phones, thinking that I'd have to live in my trailer and work days to pay my friends back. But then I was really a trailer person, despite the borrowed homes. One old black woman said something about the Grey Man to a middle-aged woman who looked like her citified daughter.

I said, "I saw him, myself."

The middle-aged woman looked at me as though resenting this white woman playing on her poor old superstitious mother, but the old woman nodded and said, "Yeah, but he go under the water when he not be signifying hurricane."

"Was he kin to Dubois?"

She looked at me and said, "The Grey Man help Dubois find he some women."

"Dubois another Grey Man now," I said, ignoring the daughter's little disapproving hiss.

"Thought he too close," the old woman said, satisfied that things had worked out. "He gonna be a *bad* Grey Man, maybe come round even in summer and chase off the tourists. I'd like that." She nodded. The tourists jacked up even the inlet land prices around here.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, Dubois always *was* into scaring people." A good afterlife for him, then. And what about Sandy?

I kept the British bitch and named her Ghosteater. I decided never to plant irises, because I knew if I dropped acid, inside my head Sandy was waiting, accident or not, waiting with her gun, and that was one ghost I did not want to meet. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Our February issue features several Hot New Writers—and one Old Master of the form.

Mary Rosenblum paints a vivid picture of a woman playing a deadly game of intrigue and deception, with her own life as the forfeit, in the compelling "Entrada"; **Maureen F. McHugh** takes us on a kinky and unforgettable stroll through "A Coney Island of the Mind"; **Tony Daniel** takes a man in search of himself on a long hard climb up a very high mountain, in the taut and suspenseful "Aconcagua"; **Michael Armstrong** makes a moving *Asimov's* debut with a thoughtful study of the kind of career that the great American writer Flannery O'Conner *might* have had, if things had gone just a little bit differently, in the story of how "Everything that Rises, Must Converge"; our Old Master, **Avram Davidson**—Hugo, Nebula, and Edgar Award winner, as well as the winner of the prestigious Life Achievement Award given by the World Fantasy Convention—casts his own unique kind of Magic Spell in the lyrical and enchanting "Sea-Scene, Or, Vergil and the Ox-Thrall"; **Maggie Flinn** gives us a powerful and compassionate look at "One Morning in the Looney Bin"; **Gregory Frost** returns with a chilling demonstration of how "Some Things Are Better Left"; and **M.C. Sumner** makes a fast-paced *Asimov's* debut with the colorful and action-packed story of a man who discovers that he may have bitten off more than he can chew when he tangles with "A Handful of Hatchlings." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 5, 1993, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues!

COMING SOON: big new novellas by **Isaac Asimov, Pat Murphy,** and **R. Garcia y Robertson,** plus new stories by **Connie Willis, Lisa Goldstein, Nancy Kress,** and many, many more.

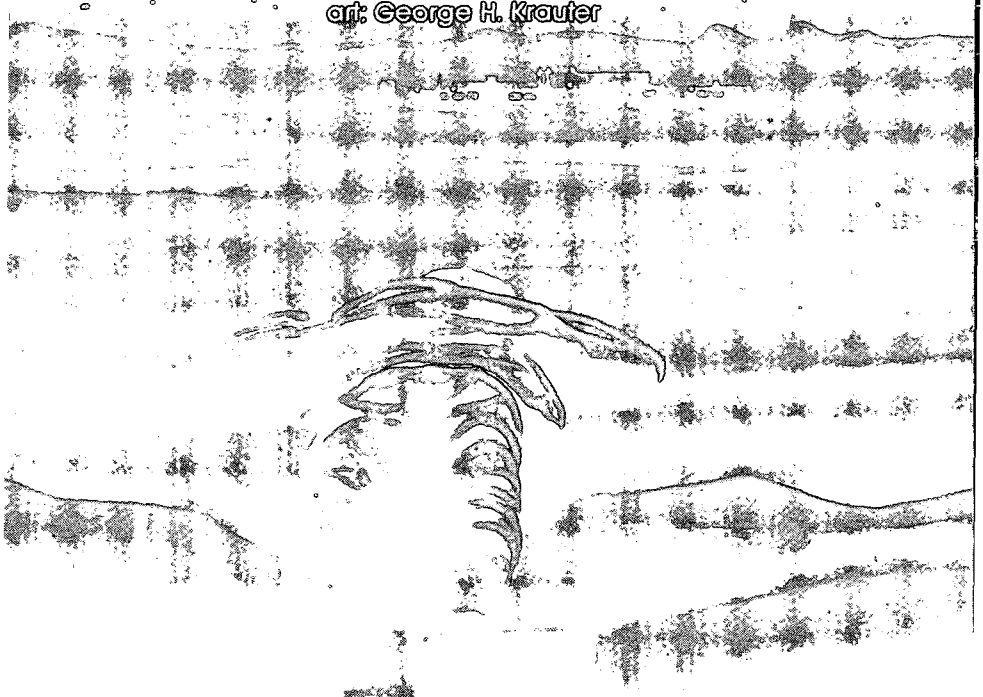
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One of the author's most recent short stories for *Asimov's*, "A Walk in the Sun" (October 1991), won both the 1992 Hugo award and our own Sixth Annual Readers' Award poll. While that tale and his latest story differ strikingly in tone, both are about the tenacity of the human will, and the struggle to survive—even under brutal and merciless conditions. His new tale takes a harsh look at a Soviet Gulag, and the men who lived and died . . .

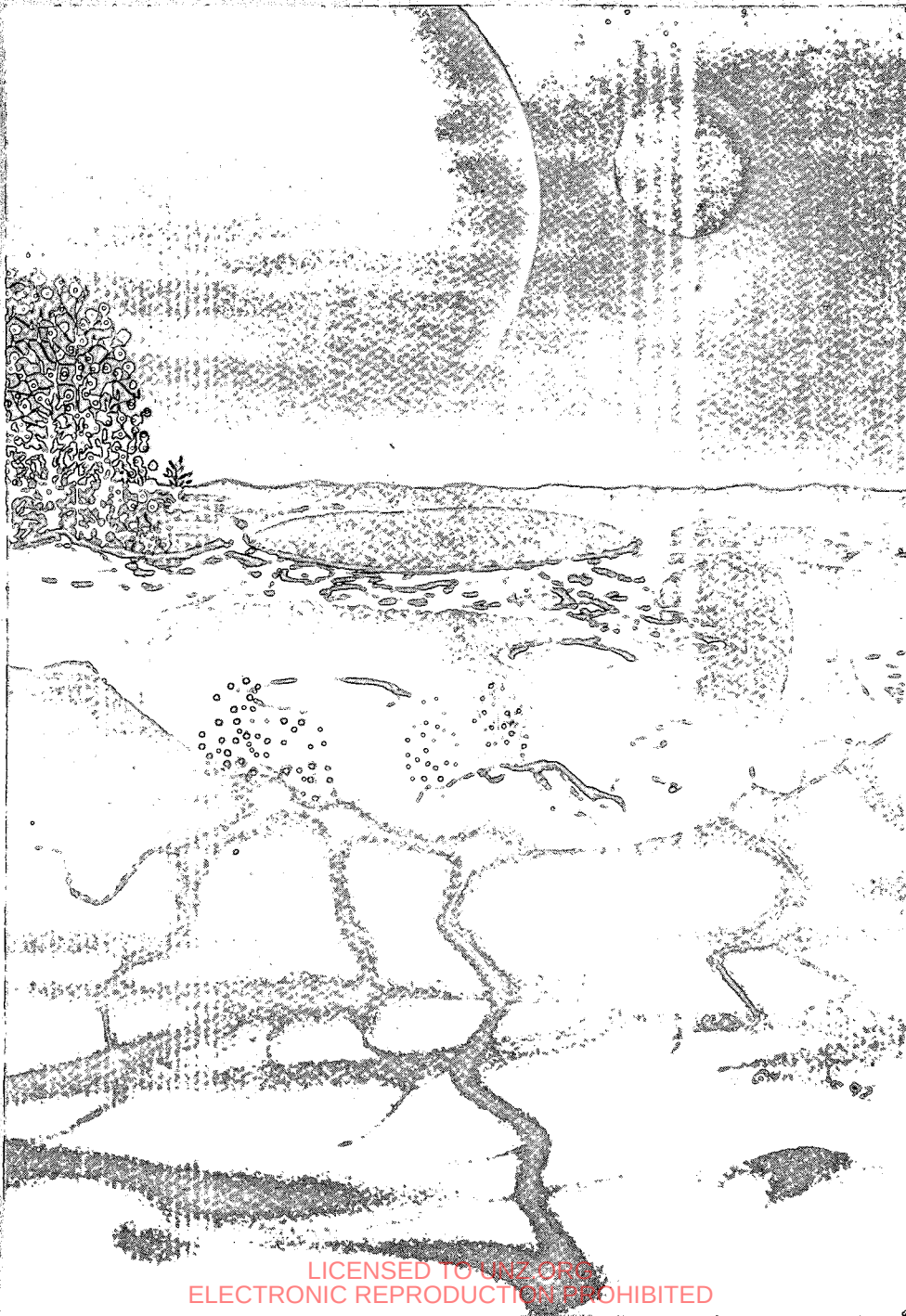
BENEATH THE STARS OF WINTER

Geoffrey A. Landis

art: George H. Krauter



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The sky was vast, an empty plain extending to infinity. Mikhail Petrovich saw only grey: the sky was grey; the rocks on the distant horizon were grey; the snow on the grey fields was grey. The young guard in his grey uniform jerked the barrel of his gun to point the way, and then turned to trudge back through grey snow toward the guard tower and the distant line of barbed wire.

Mikhail squinted against the cold wind and looked without hope in the direction the guard had pointed. Under rags that had once been blue was a man. His face was thin, almost fleshless, and his nose and his broken-toothed smile were both improbably large. "Ah, a new man! A new man!" He reached out a hand wrapped in grey burlap, only the tips of his fingers showing.

Mikhail took his hand out of his pocket and tentatively offered it. The man took his hand in both of his and shook with vigor. "So glad to see a new face, so very glad! Yes, yes! Not glad for you, no, of course not, it's sad, it's tragedy, but for us, ah!" The man let go of Mikhail's hand, only to clasp him in a bear-hug. "We love you already." He stepped back to get a better look. "And you are?"

Mikhail answered slowly. "Mikhail Petrovich. At your service." His breath came out in white puffs.

"Ah, Mikhail Petrovich, so glad to meet you! Yes! And I am Vasily, Vasily Nikolayev," he took another half step back and made a sweeping bow, almost touching his head to the ground, "at your service, yes."

From behind Mikhail a dry voice spoke. "You can ignore him, Mikhail. He's harmless."

Mikhail turned around. "Fyodor! Oh, my God, Fyodor, is it you?"

Fyodor was much thinner than Mikhail remembered, the once bearlike physique now barely filling the shapeless blue overalls. He had once been clean-shaven; now, like all the men in the camps, he had a full beard. The unkempt copper-red hair had now turned mostly grey. Fyodor opened his arms, and the two men embraced. "Yes, my friend, I'm afraid it is. I'm so sorry to meet you here."

"It's all right."

"It's not all right, but I'm afraid we have little say about it. Oh, Mikhail, I'm sorry. You don't belong here. No one could have been more loyal, more honest."

The smaller man danced around them. "So, have you perhaps already met? Yes? No? Mikhail Petrovich, meet Doctor Levchenko. Fyodor Danilovich, meet Mikhail Petrovich."

Fyodor coughed. "We've already met, Vasily."

"Yes, yes, I see! Forgive me, do. But introductions are so important, don't you think so?"

"Of course, Vasily. Perhaps you would be so good as to run and find

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the rest of the group to let them know we've got a new member? Thank you."

"Of course, of course. Mikhail Petrovich, so good to meet you! So good! Everyone will be so happy to meet you, I'm sure." He suddenly turned and ran off, his ragged grey coat flapping behind him in the breeze.

Fyodor shook his head. "Wish I knew where he got his energy."

Mikhail watched him go. On the vast tundra, the bounding figure seemed almost insignificant, swallowed by immensity. "Was he always like this?"

Fyodor shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I never knew him on the outside, not personally. He's been like this since I've been here. Don't let him fool you, though. He's the best we've got."

"Him?"

Fyodor nodded. "A first-rate mathematician. Without him, I don't know where our research would be."

Mikhail's mouth dropped. "Research? You can't be serious, Fyodor! You're doing research? Here?"

Fyodor nodded again. "Ah, my friend, without my research I would die." He coughed. "Not that I won't die soon enough anyway, I'm afraid. But what else is there to do here? Dig ditches, yes, of course, but for that we do not require the head." He laughed, but his laughter abruptly turned to a fit of coughing.

"Fyodor, you're not well."

Fyodor's coughing intensified, and to his horror, Mikhail suddenly realized he was still trying to laugh. "Not well? My friend, none of us here are well. In our brigade there are a hundred-fifty prisoners, give or take. On a good day, nobody dies.

"Mikhail, my friend, there are not many good days." He slumped to the ground.

Mikhail squatted down, put his hands on Fyodor's shoulders, and looked into his eyes. His eyes were old, old and weary, eyes that had seen too much. "Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?"

"Oh, my friend, I regret that I'm so happy to see you again before I die. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"I forgive you."

"Thank you."

Mikhail helped Fyodor to stand, and they walked slowly toward the squat sod huts in the distance.

"You were not the best of my students, Mikhail."

"No."

"But you always tried the hardest. I admired you for that. I still do." The old man looked into Mikhail's eyes. "Don't give up, Mikhail. Will you promise me that? So many people here, they let this place sap their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

will, suck out their souls. Whatever happens, promise me you'll never give up hope."

"I promise."

"Well, then," said Fyodor. "Let's go."

"Welcome to my dacha," said Fyodor, waving his hand to encompass the low building. It was well after sunset, but the strange arctic twilight lingered, and the snow-covered rocks were luminous with a purple glow. The building Fyodor indicated was almost entirely underground. Only the canvas roof, covered with moss and mud with a tiny smokehole, was visible from outside. "It is such a fine vacation villa that the men have given it their own pet name. They call it 'doghouse.' Please—think of it as your home for as long as you are here." Fyodor held open the canvas flap. "After you."

Mikhail had to crawl through the narrow doorway head-first. The interior was so dark Mikhail could barely make out the shapes of men, lying in vague lumps like caterpillars, swaddled in threadbare blankets. The smell was dank and fetid; clearly several of the men had already used the tin parasha in the corner.

"Hey, you lazy goats, is this any way to welcome a visitor?" asked Fyodor. None of the men moved. Fyodor nudged one with his foot to make room for Mikhail. The man grunted, but pressed aside, and Mikhail wedged himself into the space.

They were awakened at four AM, an hour before dawn. A tiny trickle of watery light seeped in through cracks in the walls. There was little need for more light; there was nothing to see except the dirty, unshaven men covered by thin blankets lying on a straw-covered dirt floor.

"Labor is a matter of heroism," the sign over the barbed-wire gate informed them. "I think that our heroism will be in no danger of question," Fyodor said, blowing on his hands to warm them while the guards made them wait in the cold wind to be counted. The morning was brittle and crystalline, with a low orange sun that shed light but no heat.

"This is the end of the line," Fyodor whispered. "This camp is a special one, just for us politicals with an intellectual background. We are kept separate from the ordinary criminals, even from the less well-educated politicals. Our thinking—the very fact that we *do* think—the butcher sees as corrupting." He meant Stalin, Mikhail knew. In the cattle-cars and the prisoner transports, Stalin was always referred to as the butcher.

The count had tallied with the sheet, and the guard waved them through the gate.

"But here," continued Fyodor, speaking aloud now that they were on the move, "we are free, more free here than anywhere in Russia." He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

laughed. "The guards stay back in their birdhouses, and as long as we meet quota, they let us organize ourselves as we will. Oh, not free in our bodies. But here we can talk freely. What more can the butcher do to us? Will he kill us? His best workers? Why should he bother?

"Here in our work-camps, things are bad. But not hopeless."

"Noy. Nicht Arbeitslager." The voice was soft and sad, without a trace of hope. Mikhail looked around and spotted him. A short man, sandy hair shaved close to his head. He was walking listlessly, bent over and staring at the ground with dead eyes. *"Ist Vernichtungslager."*

Mikhail was puzzled. "What did he say?"

"Ah. Mikhail, this is Franz. He can understand Russian, but doesn't speak it very well. Franz, Mikhail." Franz twitched a hand slightly, as if too tired to wave.

"But what did he say?"

Fyodor shook his head slowly. "Not a work camp, he said. A death camp." Fyodor coughed. "I'm afraid he's right. In other camps, the prisoners are sometimes rehabilitated, even sometimes go free after they serve their terms. A mere ten years, in some camps. But here, I don't think anyone is likely to see that happen. No one would last that long. To my knowledge, no one has ever left this camp alive."

Their work was to dig a ditch through the permafrost. For what purpose, Mikhail was not told. He was set to work between morose Franz and a zek named Pavel, a cheerful Uzbeki who spoke little but whistled softly and worked as hard as any two others. At the end of the shift two of the guards would come to inspect what they had done. Their channel was to be exactly three meters deep, five meters wide. The daily quota was to extend the ditch by two meters a day: thirty cubic meters of iron-solid frozen earth to be moved. In addition, the ground around it was to be leveled. If they failed to meet quota, their meager food ration was cut in half.

Mikhail was given his tool, a piece of crudely forged iron tied to the end of a sapling, to use as a pick-axe to cut the hard soil.

"It's not so bad, Mikhail Petrovich," Vasily told him. "In the morning we sing, to get our rhythm and get the blood stirring. After an hour, the morning lecture. Then two hours for discussion—"

"Wait. Lecture?"

Fyodor coughed. "Ah. I should explain our system. Each day while we work, one of us gives a lecture on a topic that he is an expert on. Relativity, electromagnetism, economic theory." He laughed. "You will like it, Mikhail. You always complained how everyone was afraid to discuss capitalist economic theories, and how can we make a socialist system work if we were afraid to study capitalism? Here you can discuss the theories of Adam Smith to your heart's content."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So Fyodor knew of his interest in samizdat economic theories. Fyodor would not have betrayed him, though. Had Mikhail been more discreet in choosing who to share his opinions with, he might not be here. Or likely he would; the NKVD needed no reasons, that had been proved well enough.

"Perhaps you would like to give a seminar next morning?"

"No! Not yet, Fyodor. Let me get my bearings."

Fyodor laughed. "It was a joke. When a new fish arrives, he always gives a lecture. Don't worry, my friend. For this, your first seminar, you will be required only to talk about the outside world. What are the latest news of outside? We learn so little here.

"And in the afternoons, we break into working groups to continue our research."

"Fyodor! Even if you discover something, who do you tell?"

"If? No faith, Mikhail, you have no faith in your old professor. Of course we make discoveries here. Do you think that science can be done only in stuffy lecture halls, with graduate students to do the working and janitors to clean up at night? Who do we tell? We tell each other. Do you think science only a way to make for your own personal glory, Mikhail Petrovich? I am sorry for you. It is enough to learn, to know what nobody else does."

In the daytime the temperature reached almost zero. In the nights the arctic chill returned, and even the guard dogs huddled together for warmth. "This warm weather will not last," said Fyodor. "Enjoy it while it's here."

They were fed twice a day, a thin gruel with a hunk of black bread in the morning, potato soup with bread and a potato or a piece of salted fish in the evening. Vasily boiled a nail in with the tea, claiming that the iron would ward against anemia, a result of the poor food.

Despite Fyodor's promise, they left him alone the first day, alone to understand the enormity of moving seventy tons of rock-hard soil with little more than his bare hands. The first day he could not make the quota, and Pavel and Franz had to work at killing speed to make up for him. They did not complain, but he could feel their eyes upon him. The next day he could hardly work at all. He ached all over. His arms were like wet rags, strengthless and limp. He tried to ignore the pain and work anyway, but barely accomplished half of what he had the first day.

His hands blistered and swelled. The second day the blisters tore open, dripping with sour, clear fluid. Vasily doctored him with surprising gentleness, cleaning Mikhail's hands with tea and then smearing them with an unguent of used tea leaves and a paste of some kind of tree bark that Vasily chewed to softness and spat into his hands. As he worked, Vasily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

told jokes and assured him that he had the hands of a woman, more specifically a high-class whore in Leningrad that he claimed to have known and done vastly improbable things with. Vasily lifted up Mikhail's hand and gently kissed it, then pressed it against his bearded cheek for a brief moment.

Mikhail pulled it away, embarrassed.

Vasily's potions helped the itching and allowed him to sleep, but didn't stop the tender skin beneath his blisters from itself blistering. The blisters broke, and Vasily tended them again. After two weeks his hands were nearly as thickly callused as any of the workers'.

At first he had trouble telling one man in faded blue *vatnik* from another, but in time Mikhail came to learn the other workers in his squad.

"Ah, Mikhail Petrovich!" said Vasily, grinning and stamping his feet in the cold. "What a wonderful place our compassionate Uncle Joseph has sent us to! Where else would we ever find such friends as these, to know and love and live and work with? Friends to live and die with, are we not the luckiest of all men?"

And it was indeed quite a varied lot he shared his fate with, no questioning that. Vasily with his instantaneous mood shifts, one moment brooding and morose, the next instant suddenly full of energy and jokes. Sandy-haired Franz, silent but hard-working, who had once been a machinist in Poland. Pavel, the pleasant and round-faced Uzbeki, a peasant accused of being a Kulak, with no education but with a photographic memory for equations and the ability to solve complicated integrals in his head; Fyodor used him as a mobile scratchpad. Gregori, a slender, elegant biologist who would sing in a beautiful tenor voice, sentenced to the camps for teaching Mendelism. Pyotr, short and squat with huge bushy dark eyebrows and a wild beard like a barbarian prince, once an electrician. Georgi, like Fyodor a former academician, a tall experimental physicist with small round glasses perched on a huge nose, who could quote whole volumes of Kafka by memory. Viktor, another of Fyodor's former students, a thin and rabbit-eyed young man with thick square wire-framed glasses.

Here they were all the same, all equal: all zeks.

There was another man, excluded from the group, one that none of the others would talk about. He was a bent, nervous man with thin hair and a toothless mouth, with haunted eyes and a perpetual look of fear, always starting at slight noises. "Don't talk to him," said Pavel reluctantly, after Mikhail had asked about him for the tenth time. He made a motion as if to spit on the ground. "He is an informer."

"He is stooped from having three vertebrae fractured when he was questioned," said Fyodor quietly. "And he left his teeth behind with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Uncle Lavrenti's friends." He shook his head. "He is more to be pitied than feared, Mikhail. He cannot make quota. It was a hard choice for him. If he did not talk to earn his rations, he would die. Do not hate him, Mikhail."

"But do not talk to him either," said Pavel bluntly. "If he sits by you, get up and sit elsewhere. When he comes to talk to you, turn your back. When he tells you of his family, walk away."

"Yes," said Fyodor. "It is hard, but it is best."

Mikhail did as he was told, and in a few weeks the camp administration had transferred the man to another work group where, perhaps, he might find more to tell of. They never talked of him again, and, much later, when the word came to them that he had died, the men were all silent save Vasily, who said softly, "oh," in a small voice full of wisdom and regret.

Despite his initial skepticism, Mikhail quickly looked forward to the morning lecture series and the discussion that followed as the high point of the day. The lectures were surprisingly effective, and the discussions more lively and uncensored than anything Mikhail had ever known. They had nothing else to think about. Mikhail was called on a few days after his introduction to the camp to talk about news from the outside, and was surprised by the eagerness with which they listened to his every word, asking for elaborations on the finest details of each point. In particular they asked for news of Einstein—had he announced the unified field theory yet? Had he published any new papers at all? Was there any news of what he was working on?

Fyodor in particular was keenly disappointed to hear that Mikhail had no news of what Einstein had worked on in his last years, save a vaguely remembered announcement of a popular lecturing tour. Vasily speculated that this might be the most important news of all: surely the physicist must be working on *something*. Perhaps the fact that there was no publication meant that the Americans were keeping the very existence of the work a secret.

But no, said Mikhail. In America, all of the work was on quantum mechanics.

"Then you and I are the last, I fear," said Fyodor to Vasily. "All the others have abandoned Einstein's trails, and follow Heisenberg and Pauli like sheep following a goat."

"Is it possible that they could be right?" wondered Vasily.

"No," Fyodor said bluntly. "The quantum theory is not self-consistent. Einstein proved that long ago."

"But Einstein also proved that travel faster than electromagnetic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

waves is impossible," Mikhail interjected. "We will never reach the stars following Einstein."

"No!" said Fyodor. His vehemence took Mikhail by surprise, and he stepped back, startled. "The *restricted* theory says that. His general theory says no such thing."

"They are on a different path," said Vasily. "This quantum theory, even if it is not the truth, certainly has much of truth in it. We will let the Americans find it. The path we follow leads elsewhere."

The next two days Vasily gave the lecture, on the theory of quantum electrodynamics, a new theory of elementary particles that had been claimed by a group of young American physicists to solve the fundamental problems. On the first day he gave a brilliant accounting of the theory, showing how it could be derived from a few simple principles and could be used to solve problems considered impossible by earlier theories. On the second day he demolished the theory, developing a neat mathematical argument based on Einstein's work to show that the new theory did not solve any of the fundamental contradictions inherent in quantum mechanics.

"Quantum mechanics is a dead end," said Fyodor, summing up. "For a unified theory we will have to start with general relativity." He winked at the others. "As, of course, we already knew."

As Mikhail watched Fyodor flitting between the men, passing equations on to Pavel, whispering with Georgi, arguing with Vasily, he realized that Fyodor's statement that he was still conducting research was not just an expression of hope.

In the middle of the Gulag, with a research staff of condemned criminals and political untouchables, Fyodor was continuing his research.

It was almost summer now. The nights were barely an hour long, and never got completely dark. Mikhail found himself confused and disoriented by the nearly continuous light. How could men still live, and never see the stars? But they did.

The camp barber—another prisoner—came through to shave the prisoners' heads in a hopeless effort to prevent lice.

Life settled into a routine.

Mikhail worried for Fyodor's health, but it was Fyodor's young student Viktor, a quiet and hard working fellow, who died first. One day he was healthy as any of them, but in the night he had cramps and diarrhea. This was nothing new to them; often the whole crew had diarrhea for weeks on end. In the morning he was too weak to work, and when they came back from the shift, cold and weary, he was delirious. The next day he was unconscious, and died before they could summon a doctor.

UPLOADED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I never really knew him, thought Mikhail, but could not help from weeping. He was surprised at the way the others, even Fyodor, held back. Surely they knew him better. Yes, Fyodor told him. But if we cry for all the dead, where will we stop? Better not to start.

Franz carefully removed Viktor's glasses, and they stacked his body outside. In the morning it was covered with a layer of frost like a marble statue. They walked past it every day for two weeks before a cart was brought around, pulled by four zeks with hard, impassive faces. They tossed Viktor's body onto the pile of other bodies, all anonymous and grey, to be taken away to be burned.

"Why are we digging this?" Mikhail asked, a week after they had stacked Viktor outside. "So far north—surely they are not planning a city here. What could the purpose possibly be?"

"We are zeks," said Fyodor, shaking his head. "We do not ask questions." He paused. "Several months ago, I was summoned to go see the commissar. I walked down the length of our work, past work done by zeks who died long before I arrived. The sides have fallen in; ten kilometers back the channel is no more than a shallow depression in the ground filled with debris." He shook his head. "I don't know, Mikhail. We work, because we work. There is no reason here."

In the seven kilometer trot out to the work site Fyodor was busy whispering figures to Pavel and Georgi, and so Mikhail trotted along with Vasily.

"They say that this is prison, that this is punishment!" said Vasily. "Oh, how little they know! How blind! They say that a year in the camps will destroy the very soul! Not so, my friend, not so. Ripped away from the hustle-bustle of everyday life in so absolute a degree that our counting the passing minutes—and I have counted them, Mikhail Petrovich, every one, each individual instant, they are my friends, my lovers—this puts us intimately in contact with the universe. Is it not so? Your eyes, Mikhail, your eyes are still clouded, still sad. You remember too much. You will be purged of every imperfection, of every passion that has stirred and troubled you in your former life, until your soul is absolutely transparent, and then your thoughts will be so clear, so very clear, you will see the ends of the universe and beyond, to the innermost void at the center of the atom, and you will begin to glow, Mikhail, your soul will glow with light like the halo of a saint. I can feel, it, Mikhail. I can."

And what, thought Mikhail, what could one say to that? Nonsense, surely nonsense, but sometimes Mikhail could feel it too, a terrible lonely light that surrounded each of the prisoners, too bright to look at. And then he looked again, and the light was nothing but the unearthly, pale

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

light of the unsetting sun, made ethereal by his weariness and inadequate sleep. When he looked again at the men working beside him he saw only corpses, animals in a grotesque parody of human form, but with empty, soulless eyes. And a sudden tremor would pass down his spine, and then he would not think at all.

Better, yes, not to think at all.

The morning lectures continued, not always about science. One day Pavel acted out an entire play by Chekhov, miming the various characters' movements with his hands. The burly electrician Pyotr surprised him by shyly reciting poetry, intricately rhymed villanelles and sonnets written to a dark-haired, elfin woman who—Mikhail was later told—had divorced Pyotr and remarried within days after he had been denounced. The biologist Gregori lectured on the possibility of life in outer space, suggesting that not only might there be life on other planets in the universe, but spores might even survive in the cosmos itself, surviving millennia-long journeys between the stars encysted like seeds buried under the frozen snow of an arctic winter, waiting patiently for a new spring.

"And so," he said, "across the gulfs between the stars, across the galaxies themselves, we are kin to other life in the cosmos. Nature is harsh, and many, most, will die in the empty vastness, but life itself endures."

Mikhail swung his pick, loosened a frozen clod of dirt, and whispered to himself Gregori's words. "Life endures."

In the middle of August, in the middle of the terrible days when the sun never set and sensitive men went mad from the endless light, Gregori collapsed at his digging. He had been coughing blood for weeks, and the others had petitioned to have him removed to the camp infirmary. The petition was denied. With a few days' rest, Gregori protested that he was well enough to continue, but on his first day back at work he collapsed again. This time rest did not help him; he died as they carried him back.

The temperature dropped to barely freezing at the lowest point in the sun's orbit above their heads—one could not really call it night. Fortunately the cart came quickly this time, and Gregori's emaciated corpse was taken away before it began to stink.

The lecture series the next week was on the subject of space travel. The bearded electrician Pyotr, Mikhail discovered, had worked on a project to make a missile that could put a radio transmitter into orbit around the Earth. The idea had been around for a century, Mikhail knew, but he was surprised at how close, according to Pyotr's disclosures, it was to

POSTED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

being accomplished. Still, the overall tenor of the lecture was discouraging. Vasily delivered the summary discourse, and pointed out how none of the worlds of the solar system were suitable for habitation. The stars hold hope, Vasily said, but quickly destroyed that hope by demonstrating that they were far too distant to reach in a lifetime with any rocket, even one powered by an atomic reaction. But when Vasily said this, he gave a slight glance at Fyodor, who answered with the barest hint of a smile, so brief that Mikhail was not even sure he had seen it.

That night Fyodor woke him up at midnight. "Come."

The doghouse had two rooms, the larger room where they all slept, and a cramped room to serve as a tiny kitchen. In the kitchen Mikhail was surprised to find Pyotr and Georgi waiting. Pyotr had in his hands a crudely made wooden cross, and was rhythmically twisting it in his hands, left, right, the muscles in his shoulders straining as he did. Georgi held something in one hand, poking at it with a tiny sliver of wood. With a shudder, Mikhail recognized one of the lenses of Viktor's glasses, bound with a fine wire and attached to various other components—bits of glass, fragments of metal and carefully-twisted coils of wire painstakingly put together into a configuration that seemed to make no sense to Mikhail. Georgi gave him a look.

"He is okay, Georgi," said Fyodor. "I stand for him."

Georgi shook his head. "Few is good."

"I said I stand for him."

Georgi nodded once. "Then let him work."

Fyodor handed him another cross. Mikhail looked at it and saw that the two pieces of wood were lashed to a lump in the center that joined them together, something that looked like a small crystal of yellow quartz wrapped in the tinfoil from American chewing gum. Mikhail raised an eyebrow.

"Like Pyotr," said Georgi.

"What is it?"

"Like Pyotr," Georgi repeated. Mikhail twisted the two pieces, and Georgi grunted. "Harder, but not so hard as to break the crystal, no? Good."

Mikhail worked at his twisting in silence and listened to the short stutters of conversation between Georgi and Fyodor, whispered so as not to disturb the men sleeping in the other room. It was fragments of numbers and instructions: "A bit more. More. Not so far. Back a half. Good." Trying to tune a radio, Mikhail conjectured. Could they build a radio out of tinfoil and bits of wire? Possibly.

"Good. Try it now." Fyodor reached out a hand, and Pyotr handed him the cross. Georgi took it and removed the crossbars, handling the crystal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with two splinters of wood held like chopsticks. He put it into the apparatus and manipulated something.

There was a sudden flash of blue-violet light, and the sharp tang of ozone. The men jumped back. "Damn," said Georgi. "Shorted it." The two men bent over it.

"What do you think?"

Fyodor shook his head. "No." He stood up. "Enough for tonight." He stretched, looking for a moment like an emaciated Christ ready to be nailed to the cross. "It is enough." He pulled a board up from the earthen floor and put the apparatus into a hole gouged in the dirt. "Sleep, my friends. It is time we sleep."

The next morning the news on the camp grapevine came that Stalin had died. The rumors flew: he had died months ago, and only now the news had been reported; he had been assassinated by his doctors; he had been killed by Beria, by Trotskyites, by the CIA; that Beria had ordered that all the political prisoners be killed; that the new secretary (Molotov? Khrushchev? Who the hell was Khrushchev?) had ordered the release of all politicals. They hardly dared to believe any of it.

And none of it affected them. Work went on, day after day, the hard labor of the daytimes and the occasional summons by Fyodor in the dead of night. The area of the camp was nothing but mud and standing pools of muddy water and the stench of thawed feces now; they were constantly dirty and bitten by insects. They would work standing in mud halfway up to their knees, and yet the ground they dug would still be frozen solid.

Around them the tundra was bursting out in a mad spectacle of growth, even the moss blossoming forth with tiny yellow flowers, as if the vegetable kingdom had determined to make up in a month of frantic haste for the long cold darkness of the rest of the year. Pavel told them which of the wildflowers might be pulled up and eaten, and which were deadliest poison. On the rare occasions when the guards failed to pay attention and let them stray off their accustomed trail, they would frantically grab handfuls of vegetation and cram it into their mouths, choking it down roots, dirt, and all.

The afternoon sun was almost warm on Mikhail's back, and under his heavy *vatnik* he was sweating. He didn't stop to loosen it; he had long since learned to ignore sun as well as cold, to focus his attention on nothing other than what needed to be done.

A generator, Mikhail suddenly thought, swinging his pick. The cross with the crystal in the center, it was an unusual kind of electrical generator. His pick stuck in the hard earth and he wrenched it free with a practiced twist, hardly noticing it, not missing a beat. A piezoelectric

DIGITIZED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

generator. Swing back, down hard! The rhythmic twisting strains the crystal, and in response to the strain it puts out a high-voltage pulse. A large chunk of frozen soil came loose. Alternating current, twisting both ways. Swing back. With some kind of a rectifier, it could be converted to DC. Hard! Another chunk loose. He couldn't see any particular advantage to such a generator over a standard design. His pick clanged off a buried rock. It would be very inefficient. He chipped carefully around the rock. At all costs avoid blunting his pick. But a standard generator took wire and magnets; where would they get magnets? Enough of the rock showed that he could get a grip on it, wiggle it with his hands. He didn't even know where they'd gotten the tinfoil; he hadn't seen foil like that since the Americans had sent over excess military rations packages after the war. The rock was almost free. A piezoelectric generator would produce extremely high voltages, but not much current. Ah! There it is! Such a generator could be good for some purposes. Yes! Hard to insulate, what the hell would they be using?

With a grunt he carried the rock over to the cart. Almost a full load. He scooped up the fragments of earth he had loosened and piled the cart full, then called to Pavel, his workmate for the day. The two of them lifted the cart up over the earthen wall and into the mud above.

But what were Fyodor and Georgi building, that required such tremendous voltages? Not a radio, that was for sure.

He explained his reasoning to Fyodor when the brigade changed shifts.

Fyodor smiled. "Ah, Mikhail, so you still do have a brain. I had begun to be afraid for you, that you were one of the lost. Good, Mikhail, think. Thinking will not keep you alive, Mikhail. But it will keep you human."

That night when Georgi took the crystal, there was no flash of blue light, no ozone. Something happened, and Mikhail wasn't even certain what it was. Fyodor and Georgi both were bent over, staring intently into the wire-wrapped lens, into Viktor's dead eye. Mikhail tried to sneak a look over Fyodor's shoulder, but couldn't tell what he was looking at. In the middle of the glass, there seemed to be a tiny speck of darkest black. Dirt, a bit of rock? But suddenly it vanished.

Fyodor and Georgi both released their breath. An air of tension left the room. They exchanged glances. Fyodor looked up at Mikhail.

"Enough for tonight, my friend. We have much to think on. But for now, to sleep."

In September the camp was suddenly visited by a plague of mosquitoes, mosquitoes so thick that the men had to make veils for themselves to be able to breathe without sucking in lungsful of insects with each breath of air. They smeared every centimeter of their exposed flesh with a layer of mud, and still their flesh puffed up from a thousand bites.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Georgi died it was a surprise. He had been coughing, but no more than Fyodor or half a dozen of the others. One morning he could not be awakened.

Mikhail had seen Fyodor impassive over the earlier deaths, but with Georgi's death, Fyodor was devastated. He had to be encouraged to eat. "He was my experimentalist. Theory is nothing without experiments, less than nothing. I can't go on, I cannot. What shall we do now? What can we do?"

"You must continue," said Mikhail. "You said it yourself. We must go on."

"Did I say it?" asked Fyodor, his expression blank. "I don't remember." But he repeated it at quiet intervals to himself all day: "we must go on."

Winter came at the end of September, with a purga that piled snow half a meter deep over their doghouse. The following day was cold and clear.

That night Mikhail woke up, and Fyodor was not in the doghouse. The kitchen was dark. Suddenly fearing the worst, Mikhail ran outside to search for him.

The night was crisp and cool, the skies brilliant with curtains of ethereal fire. The silence was absolute. Mikhail finally spotted Fyodor's silhouette on the ridgeline.

Fyodor was almost motionless, staring upward over the tangle of barbed wire, at where the northern lights flickered and sparkled against an endless background of stars.

"Come away, Fyodor. It's not good for you to watch them like this. They can suck your soul away."

Fyodor did not turn around, did not make a motion to indicate that he had heard. After a long while he spoke. "Oh, but that is what I most yearn for, my friend."

Mikhail let him watch in silence for a moment. He spoke gently. "What do you see?"

"The universe."

"Please come inside, where it is warm. You know that it is electrons hitting air molecules, nothing more."

"Oh, no," Fyodor whispered. "More, it is much more. See with your heart and mind, Mikhail, not your eyes. Plasma is the stuff of the universe itself. We, cold clumps of rock, are insignificant exceptions. One day, a trillion years hence, we too will be plasma, clothed in our own magnetic fields, free to roam the universe. We shall glow then, Mikhail, in all the colors of infrared and radio. We shall scintillate and coruscate. We shall be free."

"Come to sleep now, Fyodor."

PROVIDED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just a little while longer."

"No. Come now. In the morning we'll talk."

Fyodor sighed. "Then help me." Fyodor extended an arm, and Mikhail helped him to his feet. "Ah, Mikhail. If you were not here to mother me, what would I do?" He stumbled and almost fell, and Mikhail reached out to pull him up. His movements were awkward, and Mikhail knew he must be nearly frozen from sitting motionless in the deadly cold. Mikhail had to half-carry him back to the cabin. His breathing was light, breath barely visible in the night, and he weighed no more than a bundle of straw in the form of a man.

After a while Fyodor continued his work, although never again with the same enthusiasm.

The camp was on a bare, windswept plain at the edge of the glacial ice. No trees grew there, although the oldest of the zeks told of a time when gnarled, stunted pines could be seen barely outside the barbed wire. These had been long ago cut down, and even the roots dug out of the ground to serve as firewood. The nearest stand of trees was in the taiga ten kilometers away, and once a week a brigade of the prisoners was formed to leave before daybreak and make the journey. They would spend the day, heavily guarded, in cutting down trees and sawing them into logs to be used in the endless battle against the arctic cold. They were strictly ordered not to talk, as any talk would be taken as a planning for escape; but still, the lumbering expeditions were one of the few opportunities Mikhail had to learn, in whispers and snatches, of the inmates of the other work squads.

As the days grew shorter the work grew harder and more dangerous, the demand fiercer and more unyielding.

In October Mikhail and Franz were chosen for the duty.

Franz had always seemed silent and distant to Mikhail, a tough and unstinting worker, but aloof. Working beside him cutting trees, in badly understood German and badly spoken Russian, he told Mikhail his story. He had come from German stock, but a family that had lived in Poland for centuries. He had been a fervent communist. Before the invasion in 1939 he published a communist newsletter; after the invasion he became a partisan, hiding in the mountains to secretly aid the anti-Hitler forces. For this his reward was a term in Buchenwald. When the camp was liberated, he asked to be repatriated, not to Germany, nor even to Poland, but to the motherland of communism: Russia. He had thought the triumph over fascism was the beginning of a glorious day for communism, and wanted nothing more than to work his hardest to be the smallest part of it.

He shrugged. "And who would have guessed that my prayer would to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be answered in its least particular? I have just exactly what I asked, I think."

Not until long after sunset had they had finally cut their quota and were allowed to pile the logs onto sledges to drag back to the camp. Exhausted and numb from cold, they were clumsy and careless. With the first pull on the sledge, one of the retaining wedges came loose. A log slipped, and as Franz ran to push it back into place, another one started to roll, and another, and then the entire stack of logs rolled off, rolled over Franz and across the ground.

When they reached Franz and pulled away the logs he was white, but seemed unhurt. He protested in German that he was all right, but when the prisoners tried to lift him to his feet, he screamed in agony. The soldiers ran up, their guns at the ready. They lifted him up again, and once more Franz screamed.

One of the other prisoners translated. "His leg. He says it's his leg."

They pulled away his dirty blue trousers, and in the moonlight it was clear that the shape of his leg was wrong, that his shin jutted at the wrong angle and his foot flopped loosely back. "Broken tibia," said one of the prisoners, the best they had for a medic. "We will have to immobilize him and bring him to the infirmary."

"It's not so bad, Franz," Mikhail whispered. "The hospital will be warm, and you won't have to work. Why, we should envy you! You've found your way out of the camp, and that's a trick even the learned Academician hasn't mastered. Eh?"

Franz didn't answer. His eyes were rolled back into his skull and his face was covered in a fine sweat, a bad sign in the chill arctic night. His teeth were clenched so hard Mikhail was afraid that he would break them. As the guards watched with their guns held ready, the zek who fancied himself a medic ripped his shirt into strips to strap the broken leg to a hastily cut sapling. Franz made a soft, high keening sound between his clenched teeth, the note almost ultrasonic.

As they dragged him back on the pile of logs (they could not leave the logs; it would mean another trip, and they would not be allowed another day of vacation from their work) he lapsed unconscious.

When they got back to the camp the sub-administrator was hastily summoned. He was a stocky man, seeming almost fat in contrast to the sapling-thin zeks. He ordered the wrappings removed and inspected the leg himself, grabbing the foot in both hands and twisting it. Franz whimpered and squeezed Mikhail's hand. "It's okay, Franz. It's okay."

The administrator winced in sympathetic pain. "I'm sorry, fellow You'd be surprised what some people would try to pull off to take a rest in the infirmary. Okay." The administrator nodded, and they wrapped his leg up again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mikhail held Franz's hand until the administrator had finished the transfer order, and two of the soldiers fetched a truck to take him away to the camp infirmary.

For the next two weeks Mikhail would at odd moments stop his work, sometimes in mid-swing, and think of Franz, having a lazy rest in a comfortable bed, with full rations, no less. He would smile, and return to work. It would almost be worth the broken leg, just for that.

It was two weeks later that he heard from the camp grapevine that Franz had died of dysentery six days after arriving at the infirmary.

The apparatus now was a lot more complicated, with a small glass jar acting as some sort of vacuum tube, although Mikhail couldn't figure out how Fyodor could have managed to pump a vacuum. Pavel had taken over the task of making the painstaking adjustments when Fyodor's hands shook too badly. The Uzbeki's hands seemed too improbably huge for such a painstaking task, but surprisingly, he had proven to be good at it. In a night of slowly adjusting tiny screws carved by dead Georgi out of pine splinters, while Mikhail pumped the generator and Fyodor whispered advice, under Pavel's hands the black speck in the center of Viktor's glasses distended slowly to a spot the size of a kopek. With a whisper of satisfaction the peasant put it on the plank they used as a bench. They all hesitated to touch it, fearing it would vanish in a puff of ozone. At last Fyodor crept closer, and put his eye against the glass. He looked in silence, staring into the blackness.

After a minute Mikhail could take the silence no more. "Fyodor? Fyodor, what do you see?"

"The stars."

In November the trucks came with new prisoners to replace the zeks who had died. Mikhail was horrified to see women prisoners among the arrivals. "Have they no decency? What could they be thinking of, sending women to a forced labor camp? We have no facilities for women. What could they have possibly have done so awful that could merit sending them, women, here?"

"Mikhail, Mikhail," said Fyodor. "Look around you. Tell me, just what have *you* done so awful? What have any of us done?" He gestured to Pyotr. "He asked why food rationing didn't stop after the war. Anti-Soviet agitation: article fifty-eight, twenty-five years." He indicated Vasily. "Acquaintance with a suspicious individual: article fifty-eight, twenty-five years." Pavel. "His father owned three cows. Article fifty-eight, twenty-five years." Fyodor shook his head. "Women? Why not? In the new regime, we are all equal."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Much to Mikhail's surprise, a woman was even assigned to their brigade. Vera Lvovna. She was an overweight Ukrainian peasant, coarse and muscular, with huge pale blue eyes not yet turned empty by the camp life, and dirty-blonde hair shorn close to her skull by the camp barbers. At least she will be able to pull her share of the load, thought Mikhail.

The first day she worked she was the subject of a barrage of crude jokes and propositions. It was surprising that the zeks, after fourteen-hour days at hard labor, could even think such things, Mikhail thought. With an expression of annoyance, Fyodor squelched the talk, telling them that she was under his protection. Vasily and Mikhail quickly backed him up.

Mikhail was disgusted when Fyodor made good on his promise by taking Vera as his special charge, talking to her at each chance during the work shifts, looking only into her eyes when he lectured. Mikhail's disgust was only slightly tempered by the fact that he knew perfectly that, until she arrived, it had been he who had been Fyodor's special pupil. Not jealousy, he told himself. It's just that it is a sad spectacle when a fine man takes after a woman of her sort, a peasant, not even fit to empty his parasha. And he was immediately sorry to think it.

Her sleeping quarters were with the women in a doghouse across the camp, one that the zeks immediately tagged the bitchhouse.

Fyodor came to him on the long trek back across the steppe. "You are avoiding me, my friend Mikhail."

Mikhail turned away. "No."

Fyodor caught hold of his shoulder and gently turned Mikhail to face him. "Do not be so distant to me, Mikhail. I am old, and have not so many friends that I can leave them to walk away from me without noticing."

"You . . . and that, woman—"

"Ah, Mikhail." Fyodor shook his head. "The fires of jealousy are hot, but will they boil your tea? You do not even know her, I think. Mikhail, my heart is large. There is room in it for two."

"I am sorry, Fyodor."

"She is coming to us tonight."

Mikhail gasped. "You would—?"

"No, no, Mikhail. How could you think? She has intelligence and imagination. She will help us in our work. Our real work."

Mikhail turned away. "I see."

"Mikhail, Mikhail," Fyodor cried after him, but this time Mikhail would not turn.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vera silently took the place of Pavel, who had been weak and feverish for a week now, and was unable to take his place in the midnight work. Mikhail refused to look at her as he worked his cross, and tried to avoid listening to them whisper while she and Fyodor worked on poor Georgi's machine. The air in the small kitchen was so cold that every few minutes he had to stop and press his hands into his armpits to get his fingers warm.

Fyodor lay face down on the floor, one eye staring into dead Viktor's lens. They evidently had something, for he could hear the excitement in Fyodor's voice. "Rotate me, more, more."

Vera's hands twitched and fluttered delicately, like a clarinetist's.

"More, good! Stop! Move me in, in more, rotate me a little back, back, stop. Good. Is that the highest setting? Damn. Mikhail, more power!"

Mikhail handed him his cross without saying a word, and Fyodor's fingers shook as he took it. He handed it to Vera, who delicately pulled free the crystal at its heart and placed it carefully into the apparatus. Fyodor got back down and stared into the lens. "We lost it. No, there I have it. Bring me in closer, please."

Vera's hands moved some more. Mikhail tried not to watch them, but he couldn't help it. In the darkness they were not like a peasant's hands, but more like a musician's, almost like his dead wife's. Except that the light was not as dim as it had been. There was a bright glow coming from the apparatus.

Fyodor gave a cry of satisfaction. He was no longer looking right into the lens, but standing back in triumph. "Let there be light!" he cried. "Look!"

Mikhail and Vera both stood up and bent over the apparatus, their heads almost touching. In the center of the lens was a fuzzy spot of brilliance, red as the setting sun but far brighter, bright enough to hurt the eyes. Mikhail squatted down and put his hands out. He could feel the warmth emanating from it like a fire. "Fyodor! This is incredible!"

They all held their hands out to warm them. Slowly the wax holding the wire to the lens softened and turned transparent. "Fyodor?" Mikhail started, "Do you think that—"

With a soft slurping sound the lens slid away to the side. There was a high-pitched whistle, and the glass suddenly shattered.

The fuzzy red spot suddenly sharpened into a marble-sized crimson sphere surrounded by a disk of perfect blackness. There was a whistling roar like the engine of a fighter plane. The disk slowly floated upward. Mikhail stepped back involuntarily, and the bright sphere disappeared, although strangely enough he could still see the red circle of light it cast on the canvas roof. In the sudden wind dirt whirled up from the floor and made a dust pinwheel around the black disk like a tiny red galaxy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The disk started to tumble as it continued to rise. The red circle on the roof disappeared. In the blackness of the disk tiny pinpricks of glitter sparkled. The tent roof stretched taut. Mikhail's ears hurt. Cold wind shrieked in.

The disk disappeared, and the roar cut off abruptly. Vera stood up, holding the crystal from Georgi's apparatus.

Fyodor's eyes rolled up, and he slumped. Mikhail ran over to catch him before he fell.

Fyodor's cheek was cold, but he was not shivering. That was a bad sign, Mikhail knew.

Vera came over and felt his forehead. "Blankets," she whispered. "Get some more from the men."

Pavel protested as Mikhail took his blankets, but Mikhail was in no mood for an argument. He told him sharply to go nestle in Pyotr's arms. Vera took blankets and wrapped them around Fyodor.

"What happened," Mikhail whispered. "What did it do to him?"

"It?" she whispered back. "*It* didn't do anything to him. He's just overworked, that's all. Take a look at him. I'm surprised he could even stand up, much less labor all day and work all night. Don't you give him any rest? Does he always have to be the strongest one, even when he's stretched to his limits, and beyond?"

"Then he'll be all right?"

Her laugh was an unpleasant barking noise, and Mikhail suddenly remembered that he despised her. "No, Mikhail," she said, her voice sharp with sarcasm, "he is not going to be all right. He's going to die."

With no transition at all, her laugh turned into huge racking sobs, and Mikhail had to restrain himself from putting his arms around her to comfort her. "We're all going to die, didn't you know that? There isn't anything we can do about it."

But Fyodor didn't die. In the morning he was a bit paler than usual, and unusually quiet, but he did his morning labor without complaint. Mikhail and Vasily did their best to help him. On the long trek back from the work site Vera held him up, although Mikhail thought that he didn't seem to need it. That night there was no work on the project, but Vera snuck her way into the doghouse anyway, to check on how he was sleeping.

"He is better, but he will never be well," she whispered to Mikhail.

"Of course he is better," said Vasily. "He is our father, our soul. How could he be sick, and we well?"

"Then you had better prepare to live without a soul," she snapped back. "This coughing he has, it is tuberculosis. He's not going to last forever."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It couldn't be," said Mikhail, incredulous. "Such a thing—how could he keep it secret? Why would he? He could go to the infirmary."

Vera shook her head. "Don't be naïve, Mikhail. He wouldn't last two weeks in the infirmary, and he knows it.

Mikhail buried his head in his hands and began to silently cry.

"I'm sorry, Mikhail," she said. "I'm sorry. I forgot that you are his friend, too."

Fyodor recovered, as much as could be expected. A week later, Pyotr died, when dysentery spread through the camp.

The peasant Pavel, who had been his friend, grieved silently. He refused food for three days, and then one morning he had vanished.

It was snowing lightly, but a stiff breeze had swept away any footprints. It was impossible to figure how he might have crossed the three layers of barbed wire and past the patrolling dogs and guards, but apparently he had. The entire camp was under a restricted regimen for ten days, with reduced rations, extra counting, and unscheduled searches. They buried Georgi's apparatus, covered over its hole, and brushed the dirt to eliminate any traces. The guards searched the camp for larger quarry; it was possible that Pavel had not escaped, but was being hidden somewhere in the camp.

The tenth day the restricted regimen was called off. They had found Pavel's body. He had escaped straight north on improvised skis, perhaps hoping that the ocean had frozen enough that he could do the impossible and ski right across the north pole to Canada. His body was intact, the grapevine whispered: he had not been shot.

He had frozen to death, but he died outside the barbed wire, a free man.

The next week, on a day when two of the new men were out on the wood gathering expedition, a blizzard came. It covered the doghouse with snow well over a meter thick. The men were happy the following day when the snow was so deep that there was no possibility of work, and still the endless snow continued.

In the middle of the day the sky was hardly brighter than at midnight. Vera came over to the doghouse to check on Fyodor; she wrapped herself in layers of rags with sawdust packed between, but when she got there she was nearly frozen through. Mikhail and Vasily pulled her jacket off and held her between their bodies to warm her, ignoring the coarse comments of the other zeks. Vasily warmed her toes by holding them in his mouth, and was still afraid that she would have frostbite and that they would have to be removed. They wrapped her in as many blankets as could be spared and sat her close to the tiny stove, although they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dared not heat the stove to more than a tiny glow, knowing that the wood they had might have to last through a deadly night. They scavenged the sawdust Vera had carried in her clothes and fed it to the stove as well.

The night was bitter cold. Flakes drifted in through cracks in the sod walls too small to see, and did not melt. Even the parasha froze. They fed the stove one tiny stick at a time, hoping to make it last. Vera huddled together with the men, one zek among zeks, dozing and shivering and waking, pressed tightly together in some hope of finding body heat. The last remnants of the fire died around daybreak, but there was no light. The temperature dropped.

An hour or so after dawn Fyodor awoke. "The apparatus," he said, his voice barely more than a croak.

"It is safe, Fyodor," said Mikhail

"Use it," he whispered. "It is our only hope."

"Of course!"

Vasily and Mikhail worked the crystals frantically, while Vera repaired the central apparatus with the remaining lens of Viktor's glasses. There was no wax to seal it in place.

"No matter," whispered Fyodor. "Hold it in place with your hand. Just prevent it from sliding, and the vacuum on the other side will hold it in place."

They worked the first of the crystals in place, and Vera tweaked the wooden screws until the kopek of darkness appeared. Mikhail shook Fyodor. "What now, Fyodor? What do we do next?"

"Look in the darkness. What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"Your eye right up to the lens, Mikhail. You must nearly touch it with your eye. What do you see?"

"Tiny points of light."

"Find one, Mikhail. Go to a star."

"How?"

"Vera knows how. Guide her, tell her how to go. A bright one, Mikhail. Look for a bright one."

Between the two of them they maneuvered the lens until weak sunshine came through the disk. The men crowded around the lens, but it was not enough to warm the air. "Closer, Mikhail. Bring it in close to the star."

They made the light brighten until it was dazzling, and the lens itself was hot. Any closer and it would be in danger of melting.

It was warmer in the room, slightly but noticeably. Mikhail looked at Fyodor. "There is hope."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mikhail," said Fyodor. "I can see something in your eyes. You saw something, looking into the lens."

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"A planet."

Fyodor sat up suddenly. "You saw the Earth?"

Mikhail shook his head. "No. It was no planet ever seen, Fyodor. It had clouds in bands around the planet, but they were orange, stripes like on a cat."

Fyodor laid back down. "I knew it. The constellations I saw were too strange. I don't know how far away we have gone, Mikhail. But it is far." He slumped. "Far."

"Fyodor," whispered Mikhail. "You said that there is vacuum on the other side of the lens. Then this is not just an image, but the other side of the lens is really somewhere else? The last time, the air was sucked through—yes! So we could go through too, could we not? We could escape!"

Fyodor shook his head. "I had that hope too, Mikhail, the very first day that Vasily and I found that there were solutions to the portal equations, the day that Vasily dared to suggest that if we were clever enough, we could forge a hole through space itself. But the energy is too great. If the crystals were shattered and all of the energy discharged at once . . . but the wire could not take it, it would melt.

"And look at the stars, Mikhail. How many they are! How far away is it that we are looking? A thousand light years? A million? To the portal, distance is nothing. We could be looking into another galaxy, or back into time. If you searched for a hundred years, Mikhail, you could not search enough to find the right sun. Or for a thousand times longer." He shook his head. "It is no hope, to escape."

But Fyodor's face did not have a hopeless expression. His eyes, huge and hollow, burned with a liquid brown intensity. "We have looked into the face of another sun, you and I," he whispered. "Is that not enough?"

Mikhail nodded, and held his hand. "It is enough, Fyodor."

They drafted one or another of the men into pumping the crystals continuously. Mikhail watched the lens nervously, worried that it would break like the other one had the prior night, but it held firm. When the light started to drift to one side or the other he called out instructions, and Vera adjusted it in silence with delicate, precise motions of her fingers.

Gathered around the unsteady circle of sunlight, not daring to take their eyes off their work long enough to look at each other, they whispered together. Mikhail unveiled his heart, told her of his former wife,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his family, his barely remembered happiness. Vera told of her life. She had been a plant doctor, educated in Leningrad. She was studying grain diseases in the Ukraine when she learned that her father had been taken by the NKVD. She had gone to Moscow to petition for his release, only to learn that he had died in custody. She should have known then it would be dangerous to take the matter further. She had protested too loudly, and was sent to the camps for it.

Mikhail reached out to touch her hand. "I'm sorry," he said. He wanted to say more, but knew no words that could express the complexity of his feelings. "I'm sorry."

In mid-afternoon something failed in the apparatus. They tried to wake Fyodor, but he would not be awakened. Vasily took his pulse.

"He is alive," he said.

"And?"

Vasily shook his head. "He is alive."

The temperature slowly dropped.

Toward evening the blizzard abated, and not long after a labor team tunneled through to them. They walked out into the snow on uncertain legs, dazzled by the wan grey light and the clean air.

None of the men spoke of what they had seen in the doghouse.

When Vera was discovered in their barracks, the guards were called to take her away. For being in the wrong barracks, she was given eight days in the punishment cell. Mikhail shuddered. Eight days was virtually a death sentence; only the strongest of men survived. The rest of the men were reprimanded, but not punished. The camp could ill afford to lose many more. Fully a third of the laborers had frozen to death in the blizzard; a hundred suffered frostbite so bad that many were expected not to survive. Of the zeks who had been with the detail chopping wood, there was no trace.

They were given no day of reprieve. In the morning, wrapped in as many rags as they could find to keep warm, they were sent back to work.

In the evenings Vasily fiddled with Georgi's apparatus. Mikhail sat with Fyodor. From time to time Fyodor would wake.

"Tell me about the planet you saw, Mikhail. Was it beautiful?"

"Yes, Fyodor. It was striped, orange and white and brown, in swirling bands like candy."

"Like a tiger, was it, Mikhail?"

"Yes, like a tiger, big and bright and beautiful. Just like a tiger, Fyodor."

"It is good, Mikhail. If there is one planet, there must be many. Infinitely more than we can count." He had a fit of coughing and then was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

silent for a moment. "The universe is more wonderful than we ever imagined, Mikhail. Is it not?" Fyodor noticed Mikhail's tears. "Why are you crying, Mikhail? We have seen what no one else has ever seen. We have looked into infinity, and seen what lies beyond. How can you cry, except tears of joy?"

"Yes, Fyodor," said Mikhail, still crying. "Joy. These are tears of joy."

"It is good, Mikhail," said Fyodor. "Good." He lapsed into silence.

Sometime in the night Mikhail dozed. He dreamed that Fyodor was with him, and that they were looking at a planet, a beautiful ringed planet fuzzy and striped like a tiger; and that Gregori was there with them, and all of them, even Vera. And Fyodor said something to him, something important, but just then he woke up and could not remember what it was.

For a moment in the close darkness he could not remember where he was, but then he reached out for Fyodor. "Fyodor? Did you say something?"

Fyodor did not answer. "Fyodor? I just dreamed—" Suddenly Mikhail noticed the silence. The labored breathing, as familiar to Mikhail as his own heartbeat, had stopped. Fyodor would not answer him, would never answer again.

The pain was too great for Mikhail to bear, too great for him to cry. He buried his face in Fyodor's chest and beat his fists on the ground.

Vasily came and put his arms around Mikhail's back, but for once had the wisdom to be silent.

In the morning they took the body away, and Mikhail was alone. They must have said he was sick, covered for him. Was he sick? He didn't know, no longer cared.

In the evening Vera returned. For an instant he thought she was a ghost. There was a glow about her; the glow, Mikhail thought, that Vasily had told him about, the purity that remains when everything else has been burned away.

Could it have been eight days since the blizzard? Mikhail couldn't remember, had lost all track of time passing.

She looked around. "Where is Fyodor?" she asked. "They wouldn't send him to work—"

Mikhail took her in his arms. For the first time since Fyodor's death, he cried.

Later that night Vasily called them over. His eyes were bright, almost maniacal. He had been working on the apparatus. "Fyodor gave me his notes, did you know that? His notes, and my notes; together what an article we could write, he and I!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Good, Vasily," said Mikhail. "Perhaps they will let you free?"

Vasily shook his head. "I have written it in my head, and that is enough. This morning I burned the notes, his and mine. I have been in the camps for eight years." Vasily stopped, shook his head slowly. "Two thousand, nine hundred and fifty days. I no longer remember how to breathe free air; I do not know how to talk to free people. There are seventeen more years in my term. Six thousand days. I do not think I will live to see them all."

"I am sorry, Vasily," said Mikhail.

Vasily shook his head. "No, no! It is nothing. Look!"

He pointed to the lens.

In the lens was green. Mikhail put his eye to it, and for a moment it made him dizzy. The landscape was upside down, drifting slowly past the lens with trees growing downward toward a cloud-spattered blue-grey sky.

Vasily reached out, twisted the lens and pulled it away. A waft of warm, paprika-scented air caressed Mikhail's face. Not trees. Where Mikhail would have expected leaves, the plants grew bulbous green balloons shaped like soccer balls. In the upside-down distance he could see other plants shaped like corkscrews, with delicate flowers like a baby's fingers.

"Green!" said Vasily. "And the *shade* of green, is it not the most beautiful?"

It seemed ordinary green to Mikhail.

"But that is just the point!" said Vasily. "Chlorophyll, Mikhail! Out of the million, billion light-absorbing molecules that might be, these plants have chlorophyll! Can't you understand what that means? Their biology is like ours, Mikhail. Don't you remember what Gregori said? Like ours.

"I have been here too long, Mikhail. But you, you and Vera, you are still young. You have not yet been broken by the camps.

"Go, Mikhail, go and live my dreams."

Vasily nodded toward the tiny portal.

"But—" said Mikhail.

"We can't—" said Vera.

"You can! You must! I will work the apparatus," said Vasily. "Quickly!" He twisted two wires together, and suddenly the portal grew. It was a meter in diameter. "No time to think! Go!"

Mikhail hesitated.

"Faith, Mikhail! Have faith!" Vasily put a hand on Mikhail's back and pushed gently. "Go!"

Mikhail jumped headfirst into the sunshine of the new world, momentarily disoriented as the alien gravity grabbed him. He tumbled and hit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the ground. For a moment he was dazed. Behind him, Vera twisted as she fell.

All around him was a mad chirping of—birds?—squawking warning of intruders. The sounds of life. Floating upside down inside a ring of greyness was Vasily. "Remember me, Mikhail!" His face shrank to the size of a coin, a fuzzy disk of grey drifting slowly into a tangled green thicket. "Remember me, Vera!" The disk shrank to a point. "Live long, and free!" The point flared and vanished.

"Forever," Mikhail whispered. His eyes were wet. To the side he saw Vera stand up, awkward as a kitten in the strangely low gravity. "Good-bye, Vasily," he said, softly. "Good-bye, Fyodor. Good-bye."

Vera stood beside him and took his hand. "Good-bye, Pavel. Good-bye, Pyotr." One by one they named them all and said farewell, and when Vera stopped Mikhail continued on, saying good-bye to those who had died before she came, even the ones he had never known himself, saying softly all the farewells that they could never give in the camps.

Finally it was done, the last name remembered, and then, at last, they turned to explore the new world. ●

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

On a day when the planet seemed freshly scrubbed
and perpetual blue-grey clouds broke
to the reddish light of this sun
I thought I saw you
walking down by the estuary
but it was an Aprel'le of course
washing her scrawny pup
a purple hat cocked to one side
the sinuous grace of her eight limbs
so much like yours
carefree and as human
as any of us
"this is what I have missed"
I said to myself
my heart weighted
by the knowledge

—Robert Frazier

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

On the Beach

Steel Beach
By John Varley
Ace/Putnam, $21.95

There's a certain kind of SF novel which I think of as a kind of guidebook to an exotic world and/or culture which the author has created. There's of course some sort of plot, but it takes second place to the complicated setting laid out for us. Mind you, this is not a complaint; these books, depending on the author's fertility of imagination, can be marvelous fun, and the creation (and exploration) of other and future worlds is one of the great challenges of SF. If the plot is a sometime thing in between the wonders revealed, so what? I'm still interested. (Boring or interesting, not good or bad, are the major criteria of this corner.) You want some examples? Several Clarkes spring immediately to mind: *Imperial Earth*, for instance. In another direction, Delany's *Dhalgren*. Recently one might cite Maureen McHugh's wonderful *China Mountain Zhang*.

John Varley's *Steel Beach*, I think, falls into this category. He gives us a marvelous Luna of several centuries hence and keeps us surprised with its amazing infrastructure and peculiar culture. Earth's population has been destroyed by "the Invaders," who casually wiped it out and remained in occupation, leaving the colonies on Luna and the other planets unharmed. Two hundred years later Earth is still *terra incognita* and the Invaders remain a mystery. (The theory is that they eliminated humanity on Earth to save the other intelligent species, porpoises and whales.) It was touch and go for a while, but all the colonies survived under their Central Computers. Luna actually throve, as its CC reprogrammed itself into an entity and soon took over running the entire colony. The physical sciences declined, while the biological took off. Almost anything is now possible with the human body; sex changes are almost the norm. (The opening sentence reads "In five years, the penis will be obsolete. . . ."—it's really a sort of hype, but some opener.)

Varley's Luna is a fascinating place and fun to learn about. There are lots of diversions and some accidents to spice things up, such as the brontosaurus stampede (they're raised for meat) and the surface resort bubble blowout. There's slash-boxing, which ends with the decapitation of the loser (but not his death); David Earth, head of the Earthists, whose head and body has been planted with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

soil and who has become a complete inhabited ecosystem; and the sex-change parlors, sleazy to stylish—you can get a custom designed job with the designer label on your little fingernail.

Our hero (sometimes heroine) is one Hildy Johnson, star reporter for the *News Nipple*, the largest multi-media news organ in Luna. (Yes, stage and film buffs, that's the name of the main character in *The Front Page*: Hildy knew what he was doing when he changed his name.) As he careers from story to story, becoming involved in a suspiciously large number of major news events, it is through his eyes (and wisecracking mouth) that we learn about Luna. Eventually he has a one on one with the CC, and we learn that not only has Hildy been depressed and suicidal lately, so has the CC, which is bad news for Luna.

So there's the situation, which is more or less the plot. Varley's Luna is a lot of inventive fun for several hundred pages, but starts sagging dangerously in the middle, even though by this time Hildy is female and pregnant, and the schoolmarm in a Disney World recreation of the Old West (there are several such on the Moon).

Now sex changes have been pretty frequent in SF since Heinlein made them fashionable; what they haven't been is very convincing. Hildy goes on quite a lot as to the difference in her(him) both physical and mental, but it comes across as if (s)he had taken to wearing jeans instead of business suits.

In any case, things pick up again when Hildy discovers a butterfly living (and flying) on the Moon's surface. This leads her to the Heinleinians, who live in the discarded hulk of the *Robert A. Heinlein*, a would-be interstellar ship that didn't make it through the Invasion. They are (surprise!) anti-Central Computer, having foreseen the problems it would have, and everything ends in a moonwide dust-up (as it were) with lots of action. On the whole, this tour is worth taking.

Spirited

The Spirit Ring

By Lois McMaster Bujold
Baen, $17

The Spirit Ring is Lois McMaster Bujold's first fantasy novel, so far as I know. One might expect the sort of pyrotechnical effects of her SF, but while the finale features some splendid wizardly fireworks, it's almost an intimate tale that she tells. (This is going on the theory that the fate of a small Renaissance dukedom can be considered intimate.)

We have a master metal worker and sculptor, one Master Benefforte, who also has some skill in magic, but only the whitest, church-approved sort (mostly). For we are in a Renaissance in which magic and wizardry are taken for granted, though not exactly common, since learning it is as time consuming and tedious as any art or skill, and buying it takes a great deal of money. The Church itself has some skilled practitioners; the duchy's highest-ranked churchman, Monreale, is one of these, also walking a fine line between accepted and forbidden knowledge.

One Lord Ferrante more or less

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

takes over the dukedom of Montefoglia under the pretext of betrothal to the duke's daughter. In the initial fracas of this dastardly action, Beneforte flees with his motherless daughter Fiametta, who has aspirations to wizardry also and who has made a love token ring for the handsome captain of the guards, Uri Ochs. She sees him struck down as they flee, but the spell has been other directed in any case, to Uri's younger brother, Thur, a miner in Switzerland who feels a sudden urge to join his brother.

Beneforte dies at the hands of two of Ferrante's bravos, and his body is taken by them; Fiametta is left stranded. She realizes with horror that Ferrante needs her father's body to make a "spirit ring," an instrument of great power which uses the ghost of a mortal as its driving force, the more knowledgeable the better.

The story tells how Fiametta, with the help of Thur (whom she inevitably meets), Monreale, her housekeeper Ruberta, some kobolds (bribed with a most unlikely lure—"Mother's milk was mother's milk to them" to paraphrase GBS) and an oversize bronze statue of Perseus (modeled on Uri), saves Montefoglia and eventually accepts Thur, whom she initially regards as an adolescent lout of a miner.

The novel begins with minimal fantasy content; you feel you're reading an historical with a touch of magic rather than a fantasy set in the past. Magic in this world is only one factor of life and hardly rules it. But the story gathers steam, and you become rather charmed by the two protagonists. (I know that there were/will be cultures repressive to the female, but the spunky heroine who goes against society in order to become a wizard/space pilot/master telepath, etc. is threatening to become a genre cliché). More and more magical elements are added, and the final dustup, what with rival sorcerers, ghosts, kobolds, bronze golums, and a revolting populace, is quite a do.

Dragons? NOT!

Brother To Dragons
By Charles Sheffield
Baen, $4.99 (paper)

First the bad news. Despite the title, Charles Sheffield's *Brother To Dragons* doesn't have a single dragon in it. Remember a few months back when I pointed out that it was publishing theory that anything with a dragon on the cover (graphic or titular) would sell more? Well, for you folks who have caused that theory, forget this one. It's one of the more blatant examples of misguided marketing.

Now the good news. It's a very good novel indeed, even if it doesn't have any dragons in it. It's a compulsive read, what in clichéd publishing parlance is called a page-turner. And for the life of me, I can't quite figure out why. It's basically the life story of a man born on the New Year's Eve of the next century, which places it in the near future, a very unpleasant near future indeed. Job Salk is the son of a drug addicted mother who immediately abandons him; he has been deformed by the forceps necessary for his birth. He is placed in an orphanage of Dickensian frightful-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ness (with contemporary touches). In growing into boyhood he displays intelligence and one extraordinary talent that isn't even presented as necessarily wild—he is a genius at learning languages.

He runs away when most of the orphans are killed by tainted food bought on the cheap by the director, and again the word Dickensian must be invoked as he makes his way in a world ruined by pollution and almost total economic collapse, the *"quibra grande"* (the worldwide great crash). He does drug running for a classy whorehouse, goes back to the orphanage where he is "jaded" (branded as a JD), escapes with the nightly quota of corpses that are collected, and goes into adolescence as a street entrepreneur in the anarchic neighborhoods of what we slowly realize to be Washington, D.C. The city is still run by politicians who live in "the Mall Compound," an enclave of civilization guarded by Federal troops. But government is hardly by, for, or of the people any more. Everything is done to suit "the Royal Hundred," a handful of families that now run the country and who take what is left of everything.

Eventually, of course, Job comes to the attention of the powers that be, and thanks to a brief encounter with a young woman of the Royal Hundred, is given a choice of castration or going into a "Tandy," specifically the Great Nebraska Tandy (T.A.N.D.I., i.e. Toxic and Nuclear Disposal Installation) as a spy. These areas have acted as dump sites for humans also, especially scientists who have become the scapegoats for the general plight of humanity. Against all odds, some sort of civilization has survived within the Tandys, and the Royal Hundred is particularly suspicious that something is going on in the one in Nebraska.

It would be spoiling it to say what Job finds there, or how he manages to change the entire status quo. It is essentially no more original than the rest of the story, so why did I find it all so riveting? It could be because Sheffield has constructed a background that is absolutely convincing, and set against it a walloping good story. So who needs dragons?

Old Ones

Dorella
By Mark A. Garland & Charles G. McGraw
Baen, $4.50 (paper)

Dorella, the titular heroine of the novel by Mark A. Garland and Charles G. McGraw, is a librarian, middle aged but still beautiful and aging gracefully as all get out, unremarkable save for the eccentricity of keeping a pet crow.

Dorella is also perhaps the last member of her race, which fled to Earth from some unspecified location four thousand years ago. They are not immortal and not sterile, but live many years and infrequently have children, since these people are what could be called anti-social and do not feel the need of their own kind. Or of mankind, for that matter—they mix in human affairs as little as possible, save for mavericks such as Merlin, whom Dorella remembers, though she is Earthborn. A reference to a certain bakery ad reminds her of the elf colonies that are gone, and you are told that it is distorted per-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ceptions and memories of her people which account for many of the myths of the world.

In the present, however, Dorella finds herself more and more concerned with humans. And though she doesn't know it, a powerful enemy has reappeared in the world, a male of her species who drew power from the negative source of the nether world (as opposed to Dorella, whose power comes from rifts in space between the galaxies). It was during the battle which resulted in his supposed demise that Dorella's sister had been disembodied. Dorella has saved what she could in the body of the crow.

As Dorella moves around the country, she runs into evidence that she is not alone. What should have been an amateur Satanic cult succeeds in raising a very powerful demon. Several humans are sent after Dorella, and she must fight off other supernatural creatures not usually encountered. Finally, of course, there is a face-off with the villain, where Dorella is aided by her new human friends.

Dorella's a good story. Though there's nothing really new episode by episode, there's a nicely fresh approach in the very unspecific nature of Dorella and her people, where you're given just enough to avoid confusion, but also just enough to allow you to evoke your own speculations. Neat.

More Than Classic

More Than Human
By Theodore Sturgeon
Carroll & Graf, $3.95 (paper)

As I've mentioned before in this space, one of my great fears is that the works of Theodore Strugeon will be lost and/or forgotten. Why him, of all the great midcentury authors? Because his works are uniquely unclassifiable, don't illustrate any of the then fashionable trends and therefore don't get assigned in SF courses, are more short stories than novels (even those are magazine length short), and aren't even fashionable now, being devoted to characters as much as concepts.

But thank God, they keep being reprinted. Celebrate, because his finest novel has just reappeared. *More Than Human* was the first really original consideration of the next step for mankind since Stapledon's classic *Odd John*. Sturgeon hypothesizes a *homo gestalt*, a being of many parts, and the whole of which is greater than those parts, each of which is an individual human. The novel tells of the coming together of the strange group of misfits that make up this being, written in a fragmented kaleidoscopic form that fits the subject matter.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . A companion volume to the classy horror anthology, *The Dark Descent*, also edited and introduced by David G. Hartwell, has been published. The title is *Foundations of Fear* and the stories included (by Clive Barker, Octavia Butler, Daphne Du Maurier, Gerald Durrell, Richard Matheson et al.) are lengthier than those in the initial volume (Tor, $27.50). . . . Probably one of the most far out anthologies ever to cross my desk is *Alternate Kennedys*, edited by Mike Resnick. This is carrying the alternate world genre to a level of

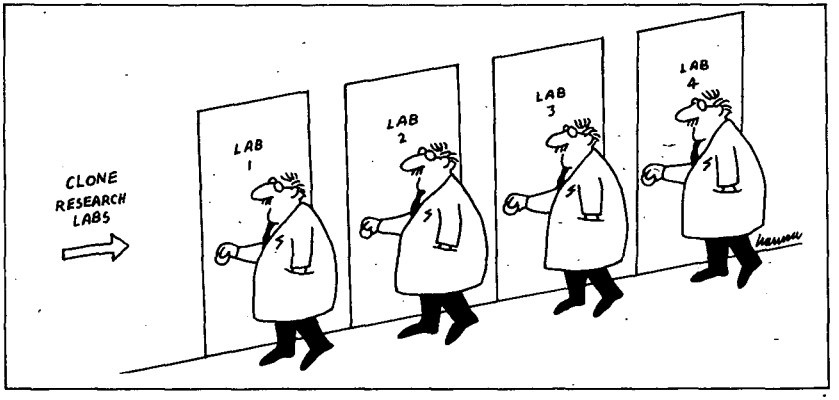
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

specialization never before attempted, and is one of those concepts that you first say "Not!" about, and then on second thought, "That's got real potential." The line-up of authors has too many known names to list without causing umbrage by omission, and the cover is just short of brilliant (Tor, $4.99, paper).... The provocatively titled *The Lifted Veil* edited by A. Susan Williams is subtitled "The Book of Fantastic Literature by Women." The list of authors stretches chronologically from Mary Shelley, George Eliot, and Louisa May Alcott (somehow one can't see Ms. Alcott wearing a veil, much less lifting it) to Ursula K. Le Guin and Carol Emshwiller (Carroll & Graf, $28).... And on the prestigiously literary side, there is *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories*, also extending chronologically, from the 1903 H. G. Wells story, "The Land Ironclads," to David Brin's "Piecework" of 1990. In between there is an excellent selection of stories not that well known by authors very well known. The editor is Tom Shippey, and it's a fine sampler for those of you unfamiliar with the past of the genre (Oxford University Press, $22.50).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot... Doris Egan has another tale of that slightly wacky planet called Ivory, a world of fantasy in a science fictional universe. This one is called *Guilt-Edged Ivory* (DAW, $4.99 paper).

Reprints etc..... The Hugo has not been the jinx the Oscar is reputed to be; running down a list of Hugo winners for the novel will reveal a roll of known names who have continued to produce. However, almost everybody takes a full stop at 1955, even if they date back that far, at the names of Mark Clifton and Frank Riley, who won for a novel called *They'd Rather Be Right*. For those who are compulsive about reading every award winner, the novel is now available under an alternate title, *The Forever Machine* (Carroll & Graf, $4.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INDEX

This index covers Volume 16 of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, January 1992 through Mid-December 1992. Entries are arranged alphabetically by author. When there is more than one entry for an author, listings are arranged chronologically in order of appearance in the magazine. All entries are followed by a parenthetical note: (c) cartoon; (ed) editorial; (na) novella; (nt) novelette; (p) poem; (r) review; (ss) short story; and (t) tribute. Collaborations are listed under all authors and are cross-referenced. When a title, a parenthetical note, or an author's name is omitted, it is the same as that of the previous entry.

—"6th Annual Readers' Award Results" ..... Aug 6

Anderson, Karen "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ... Nov 10
Anderson, Poul "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 9
Anthony, Patricia "Blue Woofers" (ss)..... Jul 96
Asimov, Isaac "Religiosity" (ed)..... Jan 4
—"Freedom" (ed) ..... Feb 4
—"The Queen's English" (ed) . Mar 4
—"Cleon the Emperor" (na) ... Apr 240
—"Foundation" (ed) ..... Apr 4
—"Whining" (ed)..... May 4
—"Speed" (ed) ..... Jun 4
—"Coming Home" (ed) ..... Jul 4
—"Sold!" (ed) ..... Aug 4
—"The Last Word" (ed)..... Nov 31
—"The Critic on the Hearth" (ss) ..... Nov 32
Asimov, Janet "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 31
Asimov, Stanley "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 29
Attanasio, A. A. "Ink from the New Moon" (ss) ..... Nov 195
Austin, A. J. "Supply Run" (ss) Mid-D 13

Baxter, Stephen "Planck Zero" (ss) ..... Jan 54
Bell, M. Shayne "Second Lives" (ss) ..... Jun 105
—"Elizabeth I: On Seeing Persephone Walk Through the Gates of Hell" (p) ..... Nov 126
—"The Sound of the River" (ss) Dec 126
Berman, Ruth "Silicon Guests" (p) ..... Mid-D 67
Bethke, Bruce & Phillip C. Jennings "The Death of the Master Cannoneer" (ss)... Mid-D 52
Bishop, Michael "The Balloon" (ss) ..... Jan 100
Boston, Bruce "In Praise of Timelessness" (p)..... Apr 304
—"What Trees Dream About in Their Prodigious Silence" (p) ..... Aug 94
Bova, Ben "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 14
—"Sepulcher" (nt) ..... Nov 98

Cadigan, Pat "50 Ways to Improve Your Orgasm" (ss). Apr 190
Carper, Steve "Wrestling with the Demon" (ss) ..... Mid-D 46
Clarke, Arthur C. "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ... Nov 5
Costikyan, Greg "A Doe, In Charcoal" (ss) ..... Jul 42
Cubellis, Amy "Planet: For Sale" (p)..... Nov 194

Daniel, Tony "Faces" (nt) ..... Apr 44
—"The Careful Man Goes West" (nt)..... Jul 8
—"Death of Reason" (na)..... Sep 120
Dann, Jack "Jumping the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Road" (nt) ..... Oct 16
Davis, Joel "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 24
de Avalle-Arce, Diane "Bats" (ss) ..... Aug 95
de Camp, Catherine Crook "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 7
de Camp, L. Sprague "The Big Splash" (nt) ..... Jun 16
—"The Synthetic Barbarian" (nt) ..... Sep 50
—"In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 5
—"The Satanic Illusion" (nt) .. Nov 128
de Lint, Charles "The Stone Drum" (nt) ..... Mid-D 110
Disch, Thomas M. "The Abduction of Bunny Steiner, or A Shameless Lie" (nt) ..... Apr 170
Disch, Tom "Adverbs" (p) ..... Feb 14
—"Not" (p) ..... Feb 114
—"Quotation Marks" (p) ..... Feb 57
Dozois, Gardner "Changes" (ed) ..... Sep 4
Dunn, J. R. "Crux Gammata" (na) ..... Oct 114
Dutcher, Roger "Amazon" (p) . Jan 70
—"Life in the Belt" (p) ..... Apr 94
Dutcher, Roger & Robert Frazier "Great Cars of the Mayans" (p) ..... Apr 67

Egan, Greg "Into Darkness" (nt) ..... Jan 12
—"Dust" (nt) ..... Jul 64
—"The Walk" (ss) ..... Dec 79
Ellison, Harlan "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 11
Evans, Jennifer "Gate Crashing" (ss) ..... Feb 77

Farber, Sharon N. "Why I Shot Kennedy" (ss) ..... Oct 101
Flinn, Maggie "50 More Ways to Improve Your Orgasm" (ss) ..... May 62
Frazier, Robert & Roger Dutcher "Great Cars of the Mayans" (p) ..... Apr 67
Frazier, Robert & Andrew Joron "Nostalgia for the Infinite" (p) ..... Jan 99
Frazier, Robert & James Patrick Kelly "Looking Glass" (p) Dec 28
Friesner, Esther M. "All Vows" (ss) ..... Nov 152

Garcia y Robertson, R. "The Virgin and the Dinosaur" (na) Feb 132
—"Breakfast Cereal Killers" (nt) Jun 149
—"Gypsy Trade" (na) ..... Nov 44
Gilliland, Alexis "Demented Trash" (c) ..... Oct 174
Gloss, Molly "Verano" (ss) .... Jan 72
Goldstein, Lisa "Alfred" (ss) ... Dec 12
Goonan, Kathleen Ann "Private Gravity" (p) ..... Nov 42
Green, Scott E. ". . . Sweating on a Pale Jurassic Beach" (p) ..... May 97
Greenberg, Martin H. "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) Nov 19

Hand, Elizabeth "The Have-Nots" (ss) ..... Jun 88
Hastings, Ashley J. "The Last Nightfall" (p) ..... Mid-D 11
Heath "What did you expect for a 5 percent royalty?" (c).. Mar 174
—"Since my weight cubes . . ." (c) ..... Apr 318
Heiser "Probability Lab" (c).... Jun 174
Hellweg, Paul "The Coke Boy" (ss) ..... May 98

Jablokov, Alexander "Above Ancient Seas" (nt) ..... Nov 206
Jennings, Phillip C. & Bruce Bethke "The Death of the Master Cannoneer" (ss)... Mid-D 52
Joron, Andrew & Robert Frazier "Nostalgia for the Infinite" (p) ..... Jan 99

Kagan, Janet "The Nutcracker Coup" (nt) ..... Dec 136
Kale, Bonita "Terraforming Byzantium" (p) ..... Dec 54
Kelly, James Patrick "The Two Cultures: for John Swope" (p) ..... May 61
—"Monsters" (nt) ..... Jun 40
—"The Physicist, Falling" (p) . Nov 205

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kelly, James Patrick & Robert Frazier "Looking Glass" (p) ..... Dec 28
Kessel, John "Man" (nt) ..... May 82
Kilworth, Garry "Memories of the Flying Ball Bike Shop" (ss) ..... Jun 70
Koja, Kathe "Persephone" (ss) Nov 117
Kraus, Stephen "Bright River" (nt) ..... Sep 16
Kress, Nancy "The Mountain to Mohammed" (ss) ..... Apr 96

Landis, Geoffrey A. "Impact Parameter" (nt)..... Aug 56
Lee, Rand B. "Letting Go of Waverley" (nt)..... Apr 68
Lethem, Jonathan "Vanilla Dunk" (nt)..... Sep 84
Lindow, Sandra J. "To Rebecca Cann and Mary Leakey, the Search Goes On" (p) ..... Mar 128
Lunde, David "Sunflower" (p) . Mar 168
—"Human Composition" (p) .. Apr 239
—"Post Coitum Tristesse" (p) Apr 189
—"The Pipe" (p) ..... Apr 169
—"The Astronaut's Wife: A Profile" (p) ..... Jul 61
—"Time-Winds" (p)..... Aug 35

MacLeod, Ian R. "Grownups" (na)..... Jun 110
Mapes, Diane "Love Walked In" (ss) ..... Mar 118
—"The Man in the Red Suit" (nt) ..... Dec 56
McCarthy, Shawna "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ... Nov 24
McDevitt, Jack "Auld Lang Boom" (ss) ..... Oct 102
McGarry, Terry "Au" (p) ..... Oct 14
McHugh, Maureen F. "The Beast" (ss)..... Mar 52
—"Protection" (na) ..... Apr 134
—"The Missionary's Child" (nt) Oct 76
—"Render Unto Caesar" (nt) .. Mid-D 134
Mullowney, Scott J. "Howard Thornton Collects His Thoughts" (c)..... May 65

Nasir, Jamil "The Heaven Tree" (ss)..... Feb 116

Person, Lawrence "The Witch's Declaration of Love for Dorothy" (p)..... May 104
Pilkington, Ace G. "Half Sisters" (p) ..... Mar 55
—"Where Scientists Write Poetry" (p)..... May 168
—"A Robot's Farewell to the Master" (p) ..... Nov 320
Pohl, Frederik "The Martians" (nt) ..... Mar 16
—"In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 8
—"Outnumbering the Dead" (na) ..... Nov 236
Purdom, Tom "Chamber Story" (nt) ..... Aug 36
—"Sepoy" (nt)..... Dec 30

Reed, Robert "Burger Love" (ss) ..... Nov 166
Resnick, Mike "Song of a Dry River" (nt)..... Mar 56
—"The Light that Blinds, the Claws that Catch" (ss) .... Jul 104
—"The Lotus and the Spear" (nt) ..... Aug 16
Richards, Joel "Overlays" (ss) Feb 64
Rosenblum, Mary "Synthesis" (na)..... Mar 130
—"Second Chance" (nt)..... Dec 104
—"The Stone Garden" (nt) .... Mid-D 24
Russo, Richard Paul "Just Drive, She Said" (ss)..... Mid-D 96

Sagan, Carl "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ..... Nov 18
Sargent, Pamela "Danny Goes to Mars" (nt) ..... Oct 50
Schimel, Lawrence "Christmas Day, Give or Take a Week" (p) ..... Dec 90
Schmidt, Stanley "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t) ... Nov 26
Searles, Baird "On Books" (r) . Jan 162
—— ..... Feb 169
—— ..... Mar 169
—— ..... May 169
—— ..... Jun 169
—— ..... Jul 169
—— ..... Sep 169
—— ..... Oct 169

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

——..... Dec 169
——..... Mid-D 169
Sheffield, Charles "Deep Safari" (nt)..... Mar 90
Shepard, Lucius "Barnacle Bill the Spacer" (na)..... Jul 110
Shockley, W. M. "A Father's Gift" (nt)..... Apr 204
Silverberg, Robert "Looking for the Fountain" (nt)..... May 14
—"In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t)..... Nov 13
Smeds, Dave "Reef Apes" (nt) Aug 78
Somtow, S. P. "Kingdoms in the Sky" (nt)..... Feb 90
Soukup, Martha "The Arbitrary Placement of Walls" (ss) Apr 227
Spinrad, Norman "Mid-List Heroes" (r)..... Apr 305
—"New World Order" (r)..... Aug 161
—"In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t)..... Nov 22
—"These Are the Jokes, Folks" (r)..... Nov 305
Steele, Allen "Sugar's Blues" (nt)..... Feb 16
Stolnack, S. A. "Straw for the Fire" (ss)..... Mar 77
Strauss, Erwin S. "The SF Conventional Calendar"..... Jan 177
——..... Feb 176
——..... Mar 176
——..... Apr 320
——..... May 176
——..... Jun 176
——..... Jul 176
——..... Aug 176
——..... Sep 176
——..... Oct 176
——..... Nov 318
——..... Dec 176
——..... Mid-D 176
Sullivan, Tim "Atlas at Eight A.M." (ss)..... Mid-D 70
Swanwick, Michael "Griffin's Egg" (na)..... May 106
—"In Concert" (ss)..... Sep 73

Tem, Melanie "Trail of Crumbs" (nt)..... Nov 176
Tem, Steve Rasnic "Head" (p) Oct 100
Tiedemann, Mark W. "Thanatrope" (ss)..... Dec 92
Tritten, Larry "The Lord of the Land Beyond (Book One)" (ss)..... Nov 230
Turtledove, Harry "In the Presence of Mine Enemies" (nt) Jan 34

Utley, Steven "The Glowing Cloud" (na)..... Jan 108
—"Haiti" (nt)..... May 40
—"Die Rache" (ss)..... Jun 67
—"Now that We Have Each Other" (ss)..... Jul 46

Van Troyer, Gene "Kayla, Lost" (nt)..... Apr 112
VanderMeer, Jeff "Mahout" (ss)..... Mid-D 86
Varley, John "Her Girl Friday" (na)..... Aug 102

Watkins, William John "The Second Generation Mole Talks of the Ozone Hole" (p)..... Jun 148
—"The Sex Kitten 3000 Simulation Game with Sensor Pads" (p)..... Jun 66
—"Why I Read Science Fiction" (p)..... Sep 114
—"The Time Tour Stops at My House After Lunch" (p)... Mid-D 133
Watt-Evans, Lawrence "Storm Trooper" (ss)..... Jan 86
—"Pickman's Modem" (ss)... Feb 58
Weiner, Andrew "Streak" (ss) May 66
What, Leslie "King for a Day" (ss)..... Sep 116
Williams, Sheila "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t)..... Nov 26
Willis, Connie "Even the Queen" (ss)..... Apr 22
—"The Women SF Doesn't See" (ed)..... Oct 4
—"In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t)..... Nov 21

Yolen, Jane "In Memoriam: Isaac Asimov" (t)..... Nov 22

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SEVENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Another year has come and gone, and *that* means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, now in its seventh year.

Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you,* the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, cover artist and interior artist you liked best in 1992. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp. 169-172) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual *poem,* rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some further cautions: Only material from 1992-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible. Each reader gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the Index. No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1993, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Asimov's Science Fiction, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10168-0035.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, voter response has been good, and some categories have been hotly contended, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference. So don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BEST NOVELLA

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST POEM

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

SIGNATURE: _____

ADDRESS: _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Classified Marketplace

IA JANUARY '93

ASIMOV/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $6.70 per word—payable in advance—($100.50 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10168-0035.

ART AND DESIGN

FOR INFORMATION, REGARDING PRINTS, POSTERS, AND OTHER ITEMS FEATURING THE ARTWORK OF MICHAEL WHELAN, PLEASE CONTACT: GLASS ONION GRAPHICS, PO Box 88, Brookfield, CT 06804, Call or Fax (203) 798-6063.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

Bargain Books

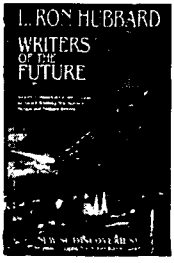
Save up to 80% on publisher's overstocks, imports, remainders. Choose from up to 8,000 titles including 600-1,500 new arrivals each month! **Science Fiction,** Biography, History, Art, Politics, Literature, Nature, Cooking, – something for everyone. Fast shipment, moneyback guarantee. Write for **FREE CATALOG**

Hamilton Box 15-773, Falls Village, CT 06031

ESCAPE TO NEW WORLDS OF

IMAGINATION

"If you buy only one paperback in the SF field this year, make it this one." – MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL



Let your imagination soar. Read the latest seventeen sparkling new stories from prize-winning writers in the acclaimed *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future®* series!

BUY IT WHEREVER FINE BOOKS ARE SOLD

$5.99 in paperback. To order direct, call **1-800-722-1733 (1-800-843-7389 in CA)**

© 1992 BPL. All rights reserved. WRITERS OF THE FUTURE is a trademark owned by L. Ron Hubbard Library and is used with its permission.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS—Cont'd

FREE CATALOGS of Science Fiction pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46032.

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265.

MANUSCRIPTS WANTED, all types. Company with 70-year tradition. "Authors Guide to Subsidy Publishing." 1-800-695-9599.

PERSONAL

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance & marriage with American ladies & gentlemen!.All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE INTRODUCTION AGENCY. (Dept. D/P). 2nd Floor, Mill Lane House, Mill Lane, Margate, Kent. ENGLAND TEL: 01144-843-290735.

TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME RADIO PROGRAMS. Great Science Fiction! Also, mysteries, comedies, westerns. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm. New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

In The Future . . .

YOUR Classified/Display AD CAN BE PLACED HERE

For details:

SF CLASSIFIED
380 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10017
(212) 856-6307

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Here's our annual holiday look a couple of months ahead. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, give your name and reason for calling right off. When writing, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

DECEMBER 1992

13-15—**SMOFCon.** For info, write: **8331 Donoghue, New Carrollton MD 20784**. Or phone: **(703) 273-3297** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: New Orleans LA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Doubletree Hotel. Guests will include: none planned. Where con runners talk shop.

JANUARY 1993

1-3—**MusiCon, Box 198121, Nashville TN 37219. (615) 889-5951.** Science fictional folk singing con.

2-4—**StabCon, 17 Davenport Pk. Rd., Davenport Pk., Stockport, SK2 6JU, UK.** Manchester UK. Gaming.

8-10—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (305) 793-7581.** Campbell. Darkside SF.

8-10—**Winter Fantasy, Box 515, Lake Geneva WI 53147.** Milwaukee WI. RPGA & other role-play gaming.

15-17—**RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 938-4844.** R. Zelazny, P. Foglio, J. Cramer.

15-17—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (404) 578-8461, or 591-9322, or 623-0579.**

15-17—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 270-9794.** Kushner, Lang.

22-24—**ConFurence, Box 1958, Garden Grove CA 92642. (714) 530-1312.** Anaheim CA. Funny animals.

29-Feb 1—**RadiCon, Box 322, Bentleigh VIC 3204, Australia. (11-613) 557-7088.** Melbourne.

FEBRUARY 1993

5-7—**Pentatonic, 3 W. Shrubbery, Redland, Bristol, BS6 6SZ, UK.** SF/fantasy folksinging.

5-7—**PsurrealCon, Box 2069, Norman OK 73070.** Two to three hundred usually attend this convention.

5-7—**Winterfest, Box 1252, Claremont CA 91711. (800) 266-3111.** Victorville CA. Model-rocket meet.

12-14—**VisionCon, 1375 S. National Ave., Springfield MO 65804. (417) 863-1155.** Media & gaming.

12-14—**CostumeCon, 200 N. Homewood Ave., Pittsburgh PA 15232. (412) 242-8837.** For masqueraders.

19-21—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Joe Haldeman, Kidd, Meacham.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$85/US$75.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

OVER 50% OFF DURING OUR FIRST ANTHOLOGY WAREHOUSE SALE!

Our warehouse is full -- full of classic science fiction anthologies from **Analog Science Fiction & Fact** and **Asimov's Science Fiction** magazines. We need to make room for new books -- that's why we're having our anthology warehouse sale. For only $17.95 plus $3.00 postage and handling, we will send you an assortment of 9 classic science fiction anthologies. That's less than $2.00 a book and less than half the original price.

Please send your check or money order for $22.95 (no COD's please) to:

Science Fiction Anthologies
P.O. Box 40
Vernon, NJ 07462

Please be sure to include your name and address.

While we cannot accommodate requests for specific anthologies, we guarantee that you will be delighted with your surprise assortment. Also, at this great price, these anthologies will make wonderful gifts for your science-fiction-loving friends.

Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery. Available only in U.S.

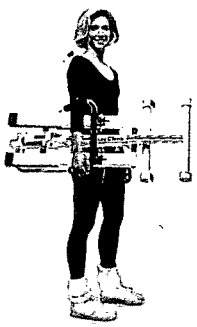
MPNA-4

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ☆ ORDER ☆ MALL

▽ STEP UP TO A HEALTHIER YOU

Doctors, physical trainers, and athletes agree that stair climbing is one of the best forms of aerobic exercise. You can achieve your fitness goals without the severe jarring or pounding associated with running or jogging. That's why the foldaway ExerClimb™ is the perfect piece of exercise equipment. The ExerClimb™ improves cardiovascular function, increases endurance, burns body fat, and conditions major muscle groups to tighten and tone upper body, thighs, hips, buttocks, and calves. And results can be seen with a twenty minute workout three times a week. It is quiet enough to let you exercise while watching T.V. or listening to your favorite music. The hydraulic powered ExerClimb™ features sturdy steel construction, magnum series shocks and individual tension adjustment to insure a high intensity, low impact workout. Compact and lightweight (28 lbs.) this incredible machine fits in virtually any size room. When opened for use, it measures 28"H x 27"L x 16"W. Plus, its unique fold-away feature makes carrying and storage a snap. Perfect to take along to your office, trips, or almost anywhere. Some assembly required, using only screwdriver and pliers. For all these great features, one would expect to pay much more, but the ExerClimb™ has a very trim price tag. So now there is no reason not to "step" into better shape. Ninety day warranty. **$119.98** ($15.00) #A1998.



TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** DEPT013 AS; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. **30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund.**

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1991 · 1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, N.J. 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED